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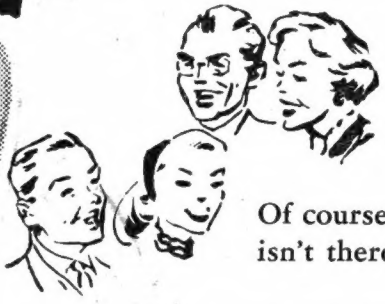

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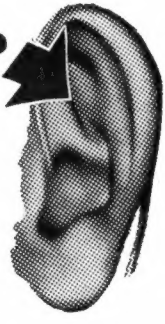

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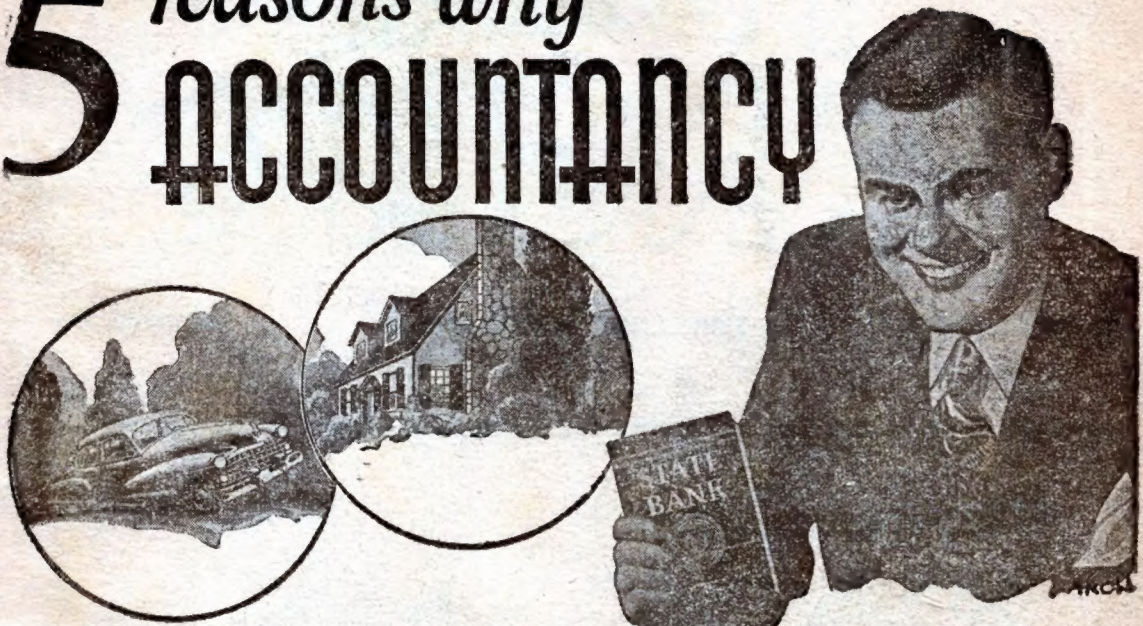

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VOLUME XL, NUMBER 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION DECEMBER, 1949

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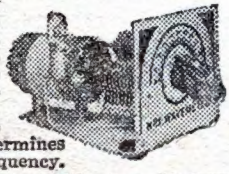

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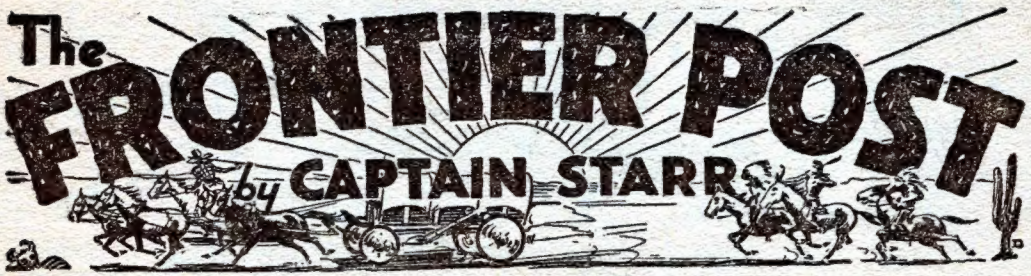

HIYA, gals and galluses! Almost any schoolboy or schoolgirl can recognize our principal wild animals and knows something about their habits. But mighty few of us, young or old, know more than a half-dozen wild plants by name.

Why that is, it's hard to say. Unless it's because so many weeds, grasses and flowers look a lot alike, except to the trained eye of a botanist. I've lived in the open most all my life, from Texas west, but my knowledge of the numerous range grasses, even, is awful shy.

One trouble is, the common, unscientific names for a heap of forage plants isn't any real identification of them. For instance, cowpunchers speak of bunchgrass, as though it were just one kind of grass, and that settled it.

The fact is, there are probably as many as 50 different kinds of grass that go by the name, bunchgrass. So that name really doesn't mean a thing. Beargrass, buffalo grass, certain introduced grasses and even crested wheat grass go by the name bunchgrass.

Crested Wheat Grass

Crested wheat grass—which really doesn't look at all like wheat—is one grazing plant that every Western gal and gallus knows on sight, or soon will. Various bureaus under the Department of Agriculture are reseeding wornout ranges with it.

The seed is broadcast from airplanes, and to help it take root the seeds sometimes are encased in clay pellets. The "range rehabilitation program," as it's called, is going on in a dozen states, including Texas.

In some cattle country, such as in Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and eastern Oregon, sagebrush is common, and since livestock won't eat it, the shrub has thrived and spread, so as to crowd out useful grass. So cattle and sheep ranchers are clearing off the sage to give the grass a chance.

Sagebrush really isn't sage at all. The true name for the plant is artemisia. It has a rank bitterness that doesn't even interest a burro, jackrabbit or billygoat. The only critter I know of that uses sagebrush for food is the sagehen. And an old sagehen, well saturated with the stuff, tastes mighty strong.

Even Western wildflowers are pretty confusing, because most of them belong to a sub-family of Eastern wildflowers, and if there's any book that describes them all, I've never come onto it. Take the bluebonnet, which is the Texas state flower. It looks so much like Western lupine that it takes an expert to tell 'em apart.

Yes, it's mighty confusing.

State Flowers

All states have an official flower, as you probably know. Kansas has adopted the sunflower, Colorado the columbine, Arizona the saguaro or giant cactus, Wyoming the Indian paint brush, Utah the sego lily, Oregon the wild grape and so on. Not to mention California's golden poppy.

It's hard for me to get acquainted with plant or flower from pictures, or from sad-looking pressed specimens. So I make continual fool mistakes.

But I reckon I'm not the only one that's mixed up. In the Southwest, there's a plant called fireweed, so called because it has a fire-red flower. It's much-prized by beemen, because it blooms in late summer, generally in August, when most other wild flowers have disappeared.

But the fireweed of the Northwest has a blue flower, and bears the name because it thrives in burned-over areas.

In the Rocky Mountain high country, there's a plant that resembles that outlaw of garden, farm and range—the common thistle. This mountain plant looked so much like it

(Continued on page 8)

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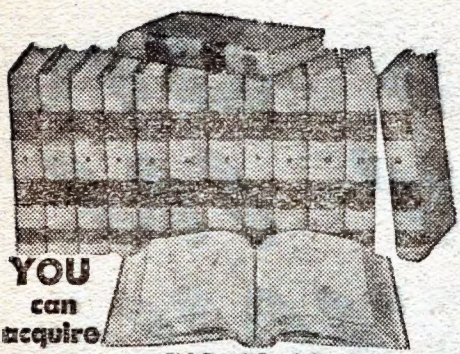

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 6)

that I dutifully scrooched a heel down on it at every chance. Until I learned that it wasn't a pest, like Scotch or Russian thistle, but a variety of Cirsium called Elk thistle, and very much cherished for two reasons. One is, it bears a bluish night-blooming flower of orchildlike beauty. The other reason is, the roots are edible, and credited with having saved early explorers from starvation.

Incidentally, the sego lily of Utah has a sweetish, edible bulb that was a valuable article of diet for early Mormon pioneers.

One of my worst blunders was to take a roadside plant for dill, the herb used in pickle-making. Good thing I didn't pick and use any. Because it turned out to be water hemlock. In the roots, stem and bloom is a poison called conin that causes serious cattle losses.

Water hemlock is also considered deadly to human critters, being related to the plant from which was brewed Socrates' "cup of hemlock."

Plants have many uses other than food, and some of those uses are quite surprising. A grasslike plant that abounds along Western rivers and in marshlands is the scouring rush. The plant cells are impregnated with fine crystals of silica, which in early times was used to scour and brighten pewter and other metal utensils. It's real handy for cleaning up a smudged camp frying pan.

It makes me feel a little better when I find out that folks smarter than I am get confused over plants, grasses and wild-flowers. Take Colorado's columbine, the name meaning "dove." It was given by botanists who thought the flowers looked like little groups of doves.

But the Latin name, Aquilegia, meaning eagle, was applied by earlier scientists with equally far-fetched imagination, who saw in the plant a resemblance to an eagle's claws!

It probably makes the faces of Wyomingites turn as red as their state flower, when they learn that the pretty Indian paintbrush is a parasite plant that taps and saps the roots of other plants.

More Strange Facts

Here's a strange thing. Larkspur, which is very common, is plumb pizen to cattle and horses, but it doesn't seem to affect

sheep at all. But the seed of wild lupine, when frosted in late fall, is extremely poisonous to sheep.

Have you ever noticed that delicate-colored wildflowers generally bloom in the spring or early summer, and that the deeper, brighter-colored ones come later? That's because the sunlight increases to greater intensity as the days lengthen in midsummer.

The growth called lichen, which clings to rocks everywhere I've been, and as far as up into the Arctic Circle, I'm told, is nature's example of an interesting partnership. Lichen isn't a single plant, at all, but a low form of life called algae and a spore-bearing plant, combined.

The Indians used many plants for food and medicine whose value never became widely known among white men. The root of the camas lily was a staple article of diet among the Bitterroot, Bannock, Nez Perce, Blackfoot, Shoshone and other tribes. Did you ever hear of the Camas War? It broke out in Idaho, in early days, when settlers brought in hogs that rooted up and consumed camas that the Indians depended on for their own use.

There's quite a long list of Western plants and herbs that make tea, good for everything from ague to lovesickness. Sagebrush tea was supposed to cure fevers. A plant with thin, green, wiry stems and no leaves, called Mormon tea, Indian tea and Prospectors' tea did things for an upset stomach. The Hopi Indians brew a wild tea that is an antidote for rattlesnake bite, and they drink it when they get fanged in their annual Snake Dance celebration. But the Hopis have never imparted their knowledge to white men, so far as I know.

Tree Lore

The plant most universally used is the tree, of course. We'd have a hard time getting along without wood. And there I'm about as much an ignoramus as I am in wildflowers.

I can spot a few. I can tell an Engelmann spruce from a Sitka spruce, three or four times out of five. I can distinguish between Douglas fir and Western hemlock, although I'm stumped in knowing red or white fir from Douglas fir. White-barked pine and limberpine look just alike to me, and as often as not I take lodgepole pine for jackpine.

The various conifers, as they're called, are

(Continued on page 91)

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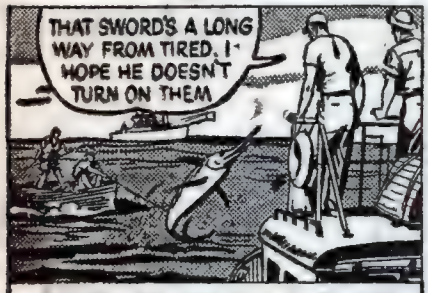

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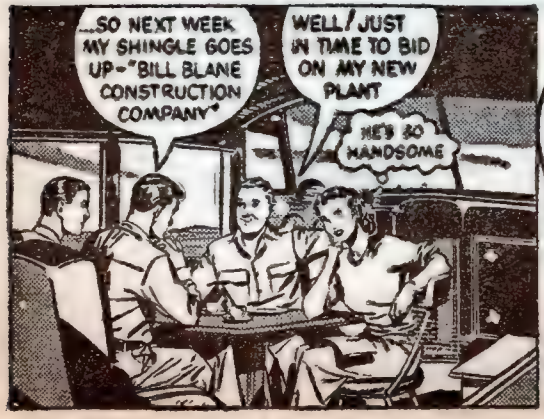

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BAYOU GUNS

a Jim Hatfield novel

by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Flames in the Night

MOONLIGHT silvered Cypress Bayou, one of the numerous winding inlets on the Texas Gulf coast. The humble shacks of squatters, most of them Creole Negroes who fished for a living, stood out against the sky. These people rose early and worked hard, retiring soon after dark.

A low sound intruded upon Nature's symphony of piping frogs, countless insect voices and the soft lap-lap of the quiet waters. The steady throbbing grew and a steam tug pushed its blunt nose around the bend, heading toward the rude landing. Oil lanterns burned on the boat and the deck was crowded with dark figures

Deep into the swamplands and tortuous labyrinths of the Texas Gulf Coast rides a Ranger to liberate the grim victims of evil tyranny!

while more peered from the cabin and wheelhouse.

The tug coasted in and lithe handlers jumped to the rickety wharf, snubbing lines on piles. Men swarmed over the low side and collected, waiting for orders. They were armed with shotguns, carbines and pistols.

"All right, boys," said a wide, squat leader. "Dip them torches in pitch and light up." Commodore Sharkey Boggs was tough and profane. As the smoking torches shed a dancing light his bare forearms could be seen, tattooed with female forms, and his red face was burned crimson by wind and sun. His fists were knotty hams, his burly legs spread. He wore a merchant officer's rig, blue suit and cap. All his features were coarse and a white scar ran slantwise over the bridge of his bulbous, inflamed nose.

"Run zem out first, Senor Admiral?" asked a slender fellow in Mexican velvet and peaked sombrero. His hair was black as ink, his skin sallow. Two silver-inlaid revolvers rode his pleated holsters and he carried the usual long knife in a sheath at his narrow back ribs. He seemed to slink rather than walk, sinuous as a snake, and from this liquid motion had come Porfirio Palacio's nickname. He was *Anguila*, the Eel.

There was the impression that the Eel could if he wished wrap himself around a victim with the same slimy insistence exhibited by the creature for which he was styled.

"*Bueno!*" he continued without waiting for the reply. "Go in zere, geeve 'em all you got. Sut-sut-sut!" He zipped his bony hand through the air as he wielded an imaginary knife, his pearly teeth gleaming.

"Fire the cabins, shoot them down when they run out, Palacio." The "Admiral," the third of the trio apart from the common herd, was obviously the chief, deferred to by the Eel and Commodore Sharkey Boggs.

ADMIRAL George Luckelew was a large man in his gold-buttoned suit. Black side whiskers adorning the squarish face were clipped short. His eyes were dark, deepset and glowing in the torchlight. He swaggered as he followed the Eel and his band. During the Civil War George Luckelew had held a position as a desk admiral in Washington and affected the manners of the sea.

"I go, Senor Admiral," said the Eel, nodding. Palacio loved to boast. "Watch. I show you how to work. You won't be sorry you hire Anguila."

The killers surged hungrily toward the shacks, torches thrust forward. Sharkey Boggs went with them, gripping a sawed-off shotgun. The Admiral stopped at the bottom of the gentle slope, thrust his hands into his side pockets and watched. He began whistling softly, a sea chantey, "Blow the Man Down, Sailor, Blow the Man Down!"

Behind the bayou stretched lush green prairie broken by patches of primeval timber, Spanish moss hanging from live oaks, cypress in the swampy reaches, piney woods on the low hills. Magnolia trees here grew eighty feet high, huge in girth. A damp, salty breeze came off the gulf over the wild and desolate region. Alligators crouched in the mud, mosquitoes throve in myriad swarms. Cypress Bayou so far had been untouched by man.

The Admiral's cruel eyes narrowed and his whistling grew more sibilant as his followers, directed by Boggs and the Eel, set torches to the flimsy dwellings. As one after another took fire the inhabitants awakened from sleep, choked by the smoke and hearing the rising roar of the flames.

The destroyers moved back, ringing the shacks. Many pulled up bandannas to hide their features. The squatters began rushing from their doors, shrieking to one another. Men, women and children emerged, dashing this way and that.

The Eel raised a six-shooter and the Colt's sharp crack was a signal for a volley, shotguns, pistols and carbines roaring. Women screamed in terror while their men, unable to cope with such force, were ripped by bullets. Two men staggered, fell and failed to rise, while others were wounded but kept going.

a Gun Argument With Pirates and Outlaws!

"Get off our range, squatters," bellowed Sharkey Boggs. "We cowmen don't want you here, savvy?"

A gap had been left toward the woods and the fishermen streamed through it, herding children and wives before them. Their homes were going up in smoke and they could not reach their boats, confiscated by the enemy. The Eel's shrill voice

"Hardtack and salt fish, sir," he ordered. He had figured he could get the most food for his money by purchasing these two items, unappetizing as they might be.

A blandly yellow sun warmed the steaming Gulf coast. Cypress Town on Cypress Bayou, was cut off from deep water by a sand bar blocking ingress from the long, narrow lagoon inside the coastal

JIM HATFIELD

could be heard as he cursed throughout the attack. Some of his followers, wearing range clothing, leather and Stetsons, or Mexican garb, carried the dead back and tossed them into the bayou waters, which reflected the dancing fires.

Admiral Luckelew's whistling broke off now and again as he laughed in amusement at the panic. Death and destruction had fallen upon Cypress Bayou.

* * * * *

Young Branch Watkins rang his last two-bit piece on the grocer's counter.

islands. And a second bar closed the inlet from the Gulf proper.

But Cypress Town apparently did not care that only shallow-draught vessels could approach her small wharves. Deep-water ships steamed or sailed past miles out, headed for other ports, while the sleepy little backwater settlement basked there, untroubled.

Branch Watkins picked up his package and went out, pausing in the road, undetermined which way to turn next. He was an earnest young man with strong muscles. His brown eyes were wideset in his homely, kind face. He needed a shave

and wore the torn shirt and tar-stained trousers in which he had slipped overboard from a hellship three nights before. Old shoes and a battered cap, which he had carried tied around his waist, a knife, a little money were all he had been able to fetch with him when he had escaped. His curly chestnut hair needed cutting.

AT THE moment Watkins' chief problem was how to get back to the stony New England farm in Connecticut which he had left, urged by youth's restlessness and a mistaken romantic notion he would enjoy life at sea. He had signed on a Bedford whaler for two years, bound for the Antarctic. The captain had proved to be a drunken bully, his bucko mates ruling with guns, belaying pins and iron fists. The skipper had taken a dislike to Watkins and had set out to kill him slowly, beating him, setting him impossible tasks. Watkins, a greenhorn on a ship, had been wide open for such cruel sport. He had been on the whaler only a day or two when he realized he hated the business, that horses and cattle were his forte and steady, dry land his habitat.

They had dropped anchor off a Texas port to take on fresh water and food. The sailors had not been allowed to go ashore but Watkins had swum for it. At dawn the captain had sent a mate and party in pursuit but Watkins had left the town walking south on the winding dirt roads and trails, glad just to be free. He had bought food in little country stores, slept in deserted shacks or under trees.

Now the first flush had worn off. He had saved his life but he was stranded, on the beach.

There seemed to be no industry to speak of in Cypress Town. A few fishing smacks worked out of the place. Unpainted wooden cabins, some larger structures, made up the settlement. There were three saloons, one run by a Mexican, the largest called "The Dolphin," having a gambling parlor and renting rooms. There was one general store, a livery stable and feed emporium which had a hardware line up front.

Branch Watkins finally turned toward the bayou and trudged slowly along the rutted street. There were some trees on the shore affording shade and he sat down under one, opened his package and began a light meal.

A faint chugging on the hot air attracted his attention. Jaws slowly working, he looked down the winding bayou and saw a shallow-draught steam tug with a blunt nose approaching. Several seamen idled on deck and a wide figure in a gold-braided cap pushed back on his burly head leaned from the pilot's window as he steered in. The tug was warped to the lengthwise landing.

The tug captain came down an outside ladder, and despite his bulk lightly skipped over the side, jumping to the dock. Watkins watched out of idle curiosity. The man was squat but extremely broad. He came rapidly up the path, trailed by a couple of friends. Seeing Watkins, he stopped and faced him.

Fishy but shrewd eyes seamed at the corners studied Branch Watkins. The powerful arms hung bare and in purple tattoo ink female forms were shaped so that when he flexed his muscles the pictures performed a sinuous dance. At the V of his open shirt the upper spars of a square-rigged sailing ship showed through the hairy growth. His face was crimson from weathering and high color, his fists like hams, his legs burly. His features were coarse and a white scar slanted down his bulbous nose. He was a tough seadog in the blue pants and cap and reminded Watkins of the buck mates on the ship from which he had escaped.

"Howdy, sailor," he nodded. "Yuh look salty, anyway." He wasn't so certain that Watkins was off the sea except for the clothing Watkins had on. He spoke in a gruff, friendly manner. "I'm Commodore Sharkey Boggs. How would you like a cinch of a job?"

"I wouldn't, not on the water," shrugged Watkins. He kept chewing his hardtack.

"Oh, it ain't. A little diggin', that's all. I might make you a foreman; you look smart. Swell grub, all the beef you can stow away, and a fine bunch of fellers. I'll treat you right."

Watkins hesitated. This might be a shanghai trick and the wide commodore might be greasing him for the skids. But his position was desperate. If he could earn enough money he could pay his way back home. "Where is it?" he inquired.

"Right out there on the island," replied Boggs, with a wave of his hand. "Come on,

I'll stand you a drink, win or lose. I aim to pick up some more boys today."

WATKINS rose and walked along with Boggs, who was very hearty and kind. Boggs bought drinks at the Dolphin. Several more laborers were interviewed, men who had come to Cypress Town to meet Boggs. Watkins decided to chance it and when the tug put down the bayou mouth, he was aboard.

The lagoon was muddy, shallow and quiet behind the long, narrow protective island a mile or so offshore. It was only a few feet above sea level at the northern end but rose southward, with eroded bluffs and stands of timber visible. All along the Texas coast were strung such natural breakwaters, holding back the fury of the mighty ocean. Gulls and other denizens of the tidewater flats could be seen.

A crude pier had been built where the tug could discharge passengers and cargo. There were tents standing on the beach and as Branch Watkins walked through the sand with the others he saw men working with picks and shovels, and horses harnessed to scoops. A channel was being cut through the island. He noticed some cows in a pen near the tents, and later saw more running loose below the camp.

There were some armed men around, Mexicans and Texans in range clothing. One of them, an elegant, slender *vaquero* in velvet and a peaked sombrero, wearing pearl-trimmed six-shooters, strolled over to meet Sharkey Boggs. Watkins was close enough to hear what they said.

"Buenas tardes," greeted the Mexican. His hair was inky, his skin yellowish and he was one of the thinnest men Watkins had ever seen. He slunk, flowing along instead of walking as did most people. His liquid eyes idly touched Watkins and the others but he took little interest in them.

"Howdy, Eel," said Boggs with a nod.

The nickname certainly fitted, thought Watkins. As the Eel turned and walked beside Boggs, chattering away at a fast clip, Watkins could see the long knife at his back ribs.

There was dredging and other equipment, supplies and necessary impedimenta around. Watkins stared curiously at it all. Down the line were several barges, and one had a superstructure on it, seemed to be living quarters for somebody. The Eel and Boggs went toward it, walking up a plank and entering an open door.

Before sundown a whistle blew and the laborers quit work. Cooks had barbecued steaks ready, big iron pots of coffee, biscuits and molasses. The food was sustaining enough. Watkins greedily consumed beef, his first decent meat since he had left home. He talked with some of the workers. They were dull for the most part and had not been there too long. The job was just getting under way. So far, Watkins learned, they had not received any pay. They slept in the tents and were bossed by the armed crew commanded by the Eel, whom the Mexicans called *Anguila*.

Watkins slept soundly. At dawn they were routed out and again fed beef and coffee. He picked up a shovel and through the morning worked in the canal ditch as directed. He was strong, a farm youth, trained to hard labor of all types and did not mind it especially. They knocked off for a noon meal and a rest in the heat of the day.

CHAPTER II

A Warning

FOR several days Watkins worked, ate and slept. Many of the Mexican peons could speak only Spanish and they grouped together. For the most part the common workers were of a low type. They cared only about liquor, and Boggs had a supply which he doled out to them on credit but only after the day was done and they could sleep it off. Watkins saw the brawny commodore occasionally as Boggs went back and forth from his busy tug to the barge. After dinner one evening Watkins hailed Boggs and hurried to the commodore.

"I'd like to go ashore for a few hours, sir. My clothes are ruined. If you'll advance me some wages I can buy a new outfit."

Boggs frowned, then shook his massive head. "You needn't go to the mainland for a rig, sailor. We can furnish you with what you want. Just tell Marty I said issue

you clothes." The commodore swung on his heel and walked rapidly toward the barge with the superstructure.

Branch Watkins was irritated. He was growing bored and restless, cooped on the narrow isle. Others complained, too. They had seen no money yet and Watkins decided the bosses must be holding up the pay so nobody would desert. It was not much of a swim to the Texas shore but there were great mudflats and marshes to contend with. Alligators were in the bayous and lagoons as well.

Boggs had reached the special barge and went up the wide plank slanting from the sand to its deck. Watkins was growing angrier every minute. He set out after the commodore, intending to demand his rights. The sun was sinking fast, low over Cypress Bayou. . . .

Reaching the barge, Watkins was hidden from those inside by its bulk. His feet made little noise in the sand and voices came clearly to him through an open square port in the superstructure.

"Is everything ready, Boggs?" asked someone. Watkins decided this was the man they called the Admiral, who lived on this barge. Watkins had glimpsed the Admiral now and then although Boggs' commander kept to himself. At a distance Watkins had had the impression of a large

figure in a brass-button uniform with square black whiskers and the swaggering walk of a proud seadog.

"Yes, suh, Admiral," said Boggs. "Madison Rutledge is at his house in Cypress Town. He's stubborn about holdin' that Double R ranch of his. Only thing is to kill the cuss."

"Cheaper, too," agreed the Admiral coolly. "After all, I'm payin' the Eel and his bunch a regular salary. They might as well do a little work for it." The Admiral's laugh was not pleasant to Watkins' ear.

"Si, si. Funt too," cried the eager Eel "I am bored when I do nozzing, senores. I like such work, so do my *vaqueros*. We keel Rutledge and take what we want. Ees best way. Why not get the others now, too? I am fighter, you savvy me, the Eel. I win for you, Senor Admiral. Lucky you hire an hombre like me." The Eel loved to boast of his prowess.

Watkins froze under the little opening in the superstructure. He had realized he had run upon a dangerous band of killers, men planning to rob and slay.

"Make it tonight, then," Boggs was saying. "Rutledge runs back and forth between town and his ranch. Eel, have your boys ready, the tug leaves at midnight."

"Hey, hombre!" Watkins engrossed in the conversation he had been overhearing, looked hastily over his shoulder. One of the Eel's toughs had trailed him from the

labor camp. "What are you doin' there?"

"I aim to speak to Commodore Boggs," called Watkins. He started hastily up the slanting runway to the deck. Through an open door he looked into a roomy cabin finished in fine rosewood and teak. A Turkish carpet was spread on the deck, comfortable chairs, tables and cabinets, other expensive furnishings, stood about. Liquor and glasses, a box of cigars were handy. There was a kitchen and sleeping quarters beyond.

BOGGS saw the intruder and jumped up to confront him. "What you doin' over here?" he roared. "Tryin' to make trouble, sailor?" He rolled to the door, thrusting out his bull neck. His ugly face turned a shade redder.

"No, sir," replied Watkins quickly, aware now how murderous Boggs was. The commodore was armed and had plenty of help nearby. The Admiral glowered from his leather chair, the Eel had slithered over, dark eyes slitted as he stared at Watkins past Boggs' hunched shoulder. "I only wanted to ask for a little money. I'd like to send it home."

"To mother, I suppose," growled Boggs, nostrils flared. The tattoed ladies danced on his forearms. "I don't like the way you're behavin', sailor. I was of two minds about you when I picked you off the beach and brought you here. You act like a rebel. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Get out and don't come nosin' around here again, savvy?"

Branch Watkins felt the flush of reciprocal anger but he was in a helpless position to make a fight of it, as badly off as he had been aboard the whaler with the captain against him. He started to back away. Boggs gave him a violent shove which sent Watkins hurtling off. The guard raised his booted foot and kicked him as he passed, adding to his momentum. Watkins flew over the side and landed sprawling. Fortunately the sand broke his fall and he was only jolted. He picked himself up and hurried back to the tents. He could hear Boggs' cursing.

After dark Watkins turned in. He could not forget what was going to happen to that Texas rancher, Madison Rutledge. Boggs and the Eel meant to kill Rutledge.

Furious at the treatment received at Boggs' hands and determined not to remain any longer than he must among such killers, Watkins waited until the camp quieted down. Then he left his blanket which was spread on the sand in a corner of the big tent. He tiptoed to the flap, stepping over snoring figures. Lanterns were strung from posts, lighting the area, while the ports of the Admiral's barge glowed yellow.

A sentry paced up and down the strand, one of the Eel's gunhands on duty. They kept an unostentatious but close watch on the workers. Before night had fallen Watkins had noted the position of several small dories pulled up on the beach. They were used in carrying equipment across short stretches of water, to boats or to the opposite side of the island channel. One had had a pair of oars in it and he prayed they had not been taken out.

He stayed flat as he began squirming across the sand, still warm from the sun. When the sentinel was looking his way he would stop and put his head down, freezing in position. Not far away were many of the Eel's gunhands, on call, in their own camp.

"I'll never make it with that guard on deck," he thought. The man would see him in the dim light and shoot him with his rifle even if he launched the dory.

He reached the dark side of the boat by a quick dash when the sentry's back was turned. There was a chunky wooden bailer in the dory bottom and he rattled it against the side. The guard swung at the sound and came slowly over to investigate. Watkins surged up and hit him alongside the head with the scoop. A sharp punch to the body doubled him up and Watkins snatched the carbine from his relaxing fingers. He pushed off the dory, hopped in and began rowing with all his might.

Less than two hours later Branch Watkins was knocking at the door of a house in Cypress Town. The saloons were still open and a lamp burned in the front room of the dwelling which had been pointed out as Rutledge's by a bartender at the Dolphin.

"Who's there?" a sharp voice demanded.

"Is Mr. Rutledge home? I got an important message, suh."

A BOLT slid back and a stoutish man in gray flannel shirt, brown pants

tucked into halfboots, opened the door, peering out at the late visitor. He had yellowish hair and deepset blue eyes that were keen and decent. He was near fifty, decided Watkins, a person of firm character from the set of chin and mouth. He wore a mustache and short, pointed chin-beard.

"What is it? I'm Madison Rutledge." His voice was cold and suspicious and he seemed to be on guard as he watched Watkins. The caller was dirty, clothing torn and stained, hair awry. Rutledge could scarcely be blamed for wondering about such a nondescript guest late at night.

"Sir, I'm Branch Watkins. I went to work on the island for Commodore Boggs. This afternoon I heard 'em sayin' they aimed to come here and kill you tonight."

Rutledge started and his manner changed immediately. "Come in here where I can see you, young feller."

Watkins entered and quickly finished the story. He glanced at the hands of a grandfather's clock in a corner. It was 11:30. "And you better get away, sir," he warned. "They'll soon be along."

Rutledge crossed to a closed door, rapping hard on it. "Sister! Get up and dress at once." He moved with real speed, despite his stoutness, strapping on a cartridge belt, checking his six-shooters, dropping shells for his rifle into his pockets. "Have to saddle up. I'll head for the ranch. I have some men there, it will be safer than tryin' to rouse the town." Rutledge was talking more to himself than to Watkins.

"Can I go along with you, sir?" asked Watkins.

Rutledge shot a quick glance at him, then nodded. "I have a horse. Can you ride?"

"Yes, sir. I was brought up on a farm, Mr. Rutledge."

The inner door clicked open and Watkins looked at a slender young woman, in a pink dress, who came out. She had thick yellow hair piled on her trim head, and her long-lashed violet eyes flickered as they took in the bedraggled young man. Her features were lovely, animated. She was in the first flush of mature beauty.

Watkins was stricken dumb at this apparition. Rutledge said, "My daughter, Louise, suh."

"What's the matter, father?" asked Miss Lou Rutledge. Her voice was soft, musical.

"Tell you on the way to the ranch. Get your cape. Hurry!"

He went out the back door to saddle the horses. The girl, after a second glance at Watkins, returned to her room to pick up her cloak and bag. Branch Watkins heard noises out in front, toward the bayou landing. He stepped into the road and looked down the moonlit street. Boats were at the dock and men were swarming from them to the stringpiece. He was sure he heard Commodore Boggs' harsh voice giving orders. The Eel and his gunhands would be along and they had mustangs in the town corrals.

Watkins ran around back. "They're here, sir!"

Rutledge was just cinching up the third saddle. "Fetch my daughter out, Watkins."

Watkins went to the open kitchen entry. Miss Lou was coming toward him and he took her bag and helped her down the step. The three mounted, swinging through the side lane to the road.

Boggs was coming on foot, sure of his prey. They could see the dark masses of the enemy, armed killers hunting Rutledge. The commodore was early and Watkins thought perhaps his escape from the isle might have hurried the attack.

"This way," ordered Rutledge.

Someone sighted them. A howl rose and shots were fired. They could hear the whistling lead as they reined right for the highway westward out of Cypress Town. "Hope yuh can really ride like yuh said, Watkins," grunted Rutledge. "It will be touch-and-go if the Eel comes after us."

The moon was up, the shod hoofs of the flying mustangs struck fire from rocks as they rode for their lives.

CHAPTER III

Mission

CAPTAIN William McDowell was chief of Texas Rangers at Austin and sometimes he would not have wished the job even on his worst enemy. For every hundred complaints reaching headquarters McDowell had about ten officers to

send out. It seemed to him that the Lone Star empire, eight hundred miles in both directions, occasionally exploded all over just exactly at the moment when his men were busiest. Indians had to be held back from the wild frontiers, foreign outlaws driven out of Texas, and besides these extraneous evildoers there was plenty of native talent which never took a back seat when it came to heating up the atmosphere.

For a time McDowell sat at his office desk, his gnarled hands meekly folded before him on the blotter as he mulled it all over.

"It's a puzzler," he muttered. He was proud of his present calm for he had an explosive temper and the fact that he was too ancient to ride the strenuous trails any longer did not help. Major strategy and minor detail occupied him. He was most valuable where he was, with an intimate knowledge of Texas and the ways of thieves, but while the spirit was still willing the flesh refused to budge or when it did complained so bitterly he was hogtied and thrown.

"Dog it! I'll have to send Hatfield," he decided. "This is important." He had been saving his star Ranger for an emergency which was coming to a boil on the Border but first things came first.

The peace was shattered as he sprang up, swearing at the shooting pains in his legs which always came when he sat too long in one position. He kicked the chair in revenge but that only hurt his toe. For a time he appealed to the ceiling but as this did not help, he began pacing up and down with the air of an irritated panther.

Ranger Jim Hatfield stooped a bit so his Stetson crown would not strike the doorway top as he entered the office. Calm gray-green eyes brightened as he greeted his silver-haired captain, and McDowell felt better just at sight of the rugged, powerful officer.

Hatfield wore range clothing, and in oiled holsters rode his big Colt revolvers, the belt loops filled with spare cartridges. McDowell knew with what blinding speed Hatfield could draw and fire, knew the latent strength in those long arms and legs, the perfect coordination of brain and muscle which was the tall man's. The black hair shone with the health of youth, the thin hands hung easily at his slim hips. Wide shoulders, a generous mouth softening the severity of his features, made up the physical portrait.

McDowell was also aware of Hatfield's brilliant mind, that his Ranger could enter a case against entrenched, strong adversaries, operating on his own hook until he figured how to check the enemy. Hatfield never called for help. It was the other fellow who did that as the Ranger tightened his noose.

McDowell rapidly gave him the outline of the complaint which had come in.

"That's the story, Hatfield," McDowell concluded. "Cypress Town is a sleepy little fishin' town at the rim of the range. The ranchers use the Gulf for their drift fence eastward. Far as I savvy Madison Rutledge of the Double R is a good hombre but a bunch of squatters accuse the cowmen of gunnin' 'em. Two were shot down and more wounded, they were run off and their cabins burnt. That ain't too unusual for open range cattlemen to chase off folks who try to settle where they graze their stock. But Rutledge has sent in a kick, too, says a band of gunhands, one called Commodore Sharkey Boggs, another the Eel, a Mexican bandit we've had complaints about before, tried to kill him and are still on his trail. The Double R specializes in horses but runs longhorns too. They've lost a passel of 'em."

Jim Hatfield calmly took in what details his captain could supply, his keen mind ticketing names of persons and places. The case had a different feel to it than the ordinary one, he thought. Perhaps it was the salty tang of the sea mingling with the range.

HE SHOOK hands with McDowell who followed him to the door and stood there as Hatfield mounted Goldy, his powerful golden sorrel. The gelding could carry the big officer on the arduous journeys into the Texas hinterland, could maintain pace and speed beyond any horse the Ranger had ever known. And Goldy was carefully trained to Ranger work, trained by Hatfield himself. He would come at a whistle and could perform in many clever ways.

Under one of Hatfield's long legs was a carbine in its boot. The saddle-bags were stuffed with iron rations, binoculars,

The Ranger's Colts barked, driving the killers back (CHAP. XI)

moccasins, odds and ends of equipment. Rolled in the poncho at his cantle was a blanket and a spare shirt.

McDowell watched him ride off biting his lip, wishing he could go along on the wild trails.

Austin was busy, the legislature still in session. Drays and saddle horses, buggies and wagons, were in the streets while picturesque characters strode the sidewalks, hunters off the plains, cowboys from the range, city folks and others from all parts of the mighty state come to the capital for one reason or another. Westward loomed Mount Bonnell while the blue Colorado made its bend at the site, splitting Austin in two.

The Texas Ranger rode to a neat white cottage on the east side and dismounted. A young woman sat on the shaded stoop, a beautiful girl with golden hair and amber eyes. Anita Robertson was a schoolteacher, The term was over for the summer, the school closing early so older children could assist on the ranches and farms.

She smiled her greeting to the rugged Ranger. There was somebody besides old McDowell who cared whether Hatfield returned from his dangerous forays. "Buck!" she called. "Here's Ranger Jim!"

A yell rang out and a youth of sixteen came hurrying around the cottage. He was thin and tall, his nose turned up, his cheeks freckled. The sun had bleached his hair and tanned his skin. He wore blue levis and a coarse shirt, a felt Stetson.

Buck had plenty of nerve and he enjoyed excitement. Running with Hatfield gave this a natural outlet and kept him on the right road. Some day Buck hoped to be a Ranger and Hatfield was teaching him the ropes. Anita and Buck were orphans and the girl was grateful for the strong officer's interest in her brother, knowing what a fine thing it was for Buck. The Ranger had assisted them when enemies had set upon the Robertsons on the Brazos, and had been instrumental in bringing them to Austin.

"Where to?" cried Buck. "I got Old Heart Seven all groomed and my carbine cleaned, Jim."

"*Bueno,* we're goin' to see the sea," said Hatfield.

"You must let me fix you a hot meal before you start," said Anita.

She served the two when the lunch was ready, then waved to them as they moved away for the east highway to the Gulf coast, Hatfield on the golden sorrel, the bony Buck on his chunky gray, Old Heart Seven.

Two days later, the sun enlarging as it set at their backs, Hatfield and Buck rode on a red clay track, faces cooled by the salty breeze which came from the ocean. A mist hung over the coast. Bayous wound into the low land, cut by stands of pine, oak and other timber. Mighty cypresses rose from swampy reaches, rooted in the mud. Giant magnolias with the huge girth of forest trees, some eighty feet high, were in blossom. They had noted the beautiful growths as they pushed for their goal. Quail and cardinals, other brilliant birds, flitted in the foilage, catching insects, darting at the varicolored butterflies. Spanish moss draped from live oaks and wild grape vines climbed over nearby brush and limbs. This range was unfenced, the stretches of prairie wild and desolate for the most part. They sighted several bands of cattle and horses grazing in the distance.

On their right a crude sign proclaimed: "Steady Your Nerve With Wally's Whisky." They had seen others here and there advertising liquors or cures for the "misery."

"We're most to Rutledge's," observed Hatfield. "That rider we met on the road back a piece said we'd see the Double R's brand board about here." Pine woods were closing in, and they plunged into a gloomy tunnel, the fronds almost meeting overhead.

IN THE last of the daylight they turned into a narrow lane left off the highway. A wooden arrow surmounted by RR pointed toward Madison Rutledge's home. They swung along this lane, in a hurry to reach their destination. Both were hungry and knowing it was about suppertime, hoped to enjoy a hearty meal at the ranch.

This moment of carelessness nearly cost them their lives. Rounding a turn, as the sorrel suddenly rippled his hide and sniffed warningly, Hatfield saw a large number of horsemen blocking the path. Some had turned, as they heard the clopping hoofs of Goldy and Old Heart Seven. One was a beanpole of a Mexican,

in velvet and sombrero, hair inky, thin face sallow. Silver-trimmed pistols rode in pleated holsters. He pulled his rein and started his horse toward them.

The Ranger was instantly aware of danger for some of them had bandannas pulled up as face masks. At such a spot this could mean but one thing. Hatfield regretted having come through without checking more carefully as was his habit. From reports he knew the Double R was menaced. These men were heavily armed toughs and he jumped to the right conclusion, that they were there to attack Rutledge once more.

Buck pulled up beside Hatfield. The Mexican stared in the fading light, to identify them. Then he called urgently yet not too loudly, "Halt, cowboys!"

"Anguila!" This second hail came from behind Hatfield and Buck. A quick glance over a hunched shoulder told the Ranger the story only too well. A couple of gunhands had been concealed along the lane, had let them through and had them caught between two fires.

The gunslinger who had spoken from behind the trapped pair was a Mexican, his partner an ugly looking Texan. Hatfield spoke Spanish with native fluency. "Anguila" meant eel. That sinuous fellow must be Porfirio Palacio, otherwise the Eel, wanted by many law agencies for shootings and robberies along the Border and the Gulf coast.

The Eel was pulling a fancy six-shooter as Hatfield, reacting with cool speed, kicked a spurred heel at Old Heart Seven. The chunky gray jumped into the brush fringing the trail. Goldy answered knee pressure, crowding Buck's mustang along. Hatfield ripped a Colt, hastily sending a bullet toward the Eel. The high sombrero on Palacio's head snapped, ventilated by metal. The Eel's shot flew wide.

The two toward the highway threw up their guns and began shooting.

This was the type of situation where a slight slip could mean quick death. It was too close for comfort as Goldy and Old Heart Seven blundered through the woods. Dark was at hand, the trees cutting off what little light remained. Cursing pursuers broke into the chaparral after them, sending blind leaden slugs hunting for targets. "Stick with me, Buck," warned Hatfield.

They veered for the main road. The Eel's men bayed after them and the crashing progress of the two gunhands cut them off. Pushed eastward at a slant, forced to rein in, turn and try other avenues in dense spots, the Ranger and his youthful comrade rode in mortal peril.

CHAPTER IV

Double R

THEY burst from the thinning edge of the woods, the horses dropping with a jolt to road level. East was the open way and they swung to it, low over their mounts. Shots and howls placed the infuriated outlaws.

The Eel was coming after them. Night fell and as yet the moon had not topped the horizon. Both Buck and his tall friend were weary from the long trip and hungry. They did not relish the frantic dash for safety they were forced to make. In the dimness the road ribboned out ahead.

For half an hour, whenever they slowed and listened, they could catch the drumming of other hoofs. But as the moon glowed silver in the lower sky, Hatfield grunted in relief. "They've quit, Buck. Let's work our way back. This time we'll do it right."

They cut through piney woods to the open range east of the Double R and carefully approached. On a height they could see yellowish lights marking windows at the ranch. And the breeze brought on it the staccato explosions, gun volleys in the night.

"The Eel's hittin' 'em," declared Hatfield. "I reckon we bumped into the rascals as they were marshalin' for a charge at dark."

"The fuss we raised should have given Mr. Rutledge warnin'," said Buck.

They were unable to approach the buildings until nearly ten o'clock, when the attackers, after essaying several charges which were beaten off by the hidden defenders, gave up and rode away.

"We'll need to be mighty careful goin' in," warned the Ranger. "Rutledge will be on the prod."

Making sure that the Eel and his bullies were not lurking around, the officer took the lead, pushing the golden sorrel closer to the long, dark shape of the ranchhouse, outlined against the silver sky, its windows glowing from lamplight. A back door stood half open and there were other structures, stables and a crib, a bunkhouse. A creek furnished water, winding away eastward toward the Gulf.

"Double R!" sang out Hatfield. "We're friends. Hold yore fire."

Somebody out in the yard, undoubtedly checking up after the night attack, went off half-cocked, firing a six-shooter in the direction of the hail. They heard the slug whine overhead.

"Mr. Rutledge! We're here to help yuh. Don't shoot." Hatfield's stentorian voice echoed from the walls.

No more bullets answered but the kitchen door was hastily shut and some of the lamps turned out. Except for the low breath of the night wind, silence fell over the Double R. Hatfield was aware how the desperate men in there would be feeling. They would suspect a trap after what they had been through.

He rode very slowly toward the yard, pausing now and again to sing out his good intentions. When he was twenty yards from the back door, a gruff voice challenged. "That's far enough. Get down and let's see who you are or we'll fire."

Hatfield obeyed, telling Buck to stay back. He scratched a match and held it up so they could make out his face and figure.

"You alone?" asked the man in the kitchen.

"I got one friend. He can wait, suh."

"Raise yore hands shoulder high and come in slow."

Under the gun thrust through the window opening, Hatfield obeyed. The door opened and he stepped in. Half a dozen grim-faced, armed cowboys had him covered. A stoutish man with yellow hair and blue eyes, a pointed goatee and mustache showing gray, seemed to be the leader. He was around forty-five, clad in comfortable flannel shirt and old pants tucked into halfboots. He had a firm jaw.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he snapped.

"I'm huntin' Madison Rutledge, suh," answered Hatfield.

"Watch that yard, Dinny," ordered the stout man. "What do you want with Rutledge?" he demanded of the visitor.

"Captain Bill McDowell sent me, suh. We barged into the Eel and his men at dusk; you heard the firin'. We ran for it and just worked back here."

AT MENTION of McDowell, Rutledge relaxed. "Let's go in the other room where we can talk, mister."

"I got a young friend with me, Buck Robertson, suh."

"Fetch him inside."

Hatfield went to the door and sang out to Buck. "He'll see to our horses, Mr. Rutledge."

"Keep on guard, boys," warned Rutledge to his men. "The Eel may come back." He led the way through a corridor to a large front chamber where more cowboys crouched, arms at hand. There was a young woman there as well, seated in a chair by the wall. She was very pretty, hair golden, eyes a violet shade. She looked questioningly at Rutledge.

"This here is Mr.—what did yuh say yore handle is?"

"Hatfield, suh."

"My daughter Lou. Keeps the house for me, her mother's dead."

Rutledge and the Ranger went into a side den filled with a man's belongings, old saddles and bridles hanging from pegs, a rack for firearms, boxes of ammunition and other things. There was only one window here and the rancher nodded to a cowboy guarding it. "Go get yoreself a snack, Len."

Hatfield had his silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Rangers, snugged in a secret pocket inside his shirt. He brought it out for Rutledge to see. "I'm glad yuh've come, Ranger. Things are bad and growin' worse." He pointed at a chair and poured drinks.

Rutledge began his story, telling how he had been struck at, and of narrow escapes from death.

"Where's this Branch Watkins now?" asked Hatfield, as he heard how the young sailor had saved Rutledge's life from Sharkey Boggs and the Eel.

"He's right here with us, a fine hombre, suh."

"*Bueno.* I'd like to speak to him. I wish you'd keep who I am under your Stetson for a while, suh. I like to work quiet-like

till I see what's what."

"Fine." Rutledge called, "Hey, Branch. Come in here."

In reply appeared a stalwart youth with a homely, kind face. He had curly chestnut hair and wideset brown eyes. Strong muscles bulged out the blue shirt, his strong hips tight in riding breeches, sturdy legs thrust into black boots with high heels. He sported a bandanna, too, but although he wore the clothing of the range, an expert such as the Ranger could say at a glance he was no cowboy but a tenderfoot. Yet this was nothing against him. He had an honest look, very earnest.

"Yes, suh," he said mildly. "You want me, Mr. Rutledge?"

"This is Mr. Hatfield, Branch. Answer whatever he wants to know."

In a short time Hatfield had the story, how Watkins had run away from the hellship, been picked up by Sharkey Boggs to work on the island, had overheard the plan to kill Rutledge. It had been a narrow squeak the night Rutledge, Watkins and Louise had made the run to the Double R.

Rutledge specialized in horses but ran cattle as well. He told the Ranger he was sure he had been losing stock, and he believed neighboring ranchers also had been complaining.

"What about this yarn that the cattlemen attacked those Creole squatters, suh?" The officer stared straight into Rutledge's blue eyes.

"It isn't so," declared Rutledge. His gaze never wavered and the Ranger believed the cowman was telling the truth. "Why, I let 'em live there for years. They never bothered me any, they stuck to the bayou and fished for a livin'. I used to send 'em a steer now and then. I savvy it's been reported cattlemen drove 'em out. If so it wasn't me or any of my friends."

Branch Watkins had mentioned horses and cows running on the island. It might well be that the Eel was rustling meat and horses for his masters, Commodore Sharkey Boggs and the "Admiral," whom Watkins had described. Rutledge was not aware of the enemy's objective.

When he had milked them dry of information, Hatfield nodded. "I'll ride over to Cypress Town in the mornin' and see what I can see."

"Make this your headquarters," Rutledge said hospitably. "Anything you want, ask for it. I suppose you had your supper?"

"No, we ran into the Eel and went without."

MADISON RUTLEDGE leaped to his feet, mortified almost to tears. "Why, suh! I never guessed. Lou! Lou! Our guests ain't eaten yet. Hustle up."

Buck was waiting in the kitchen with the cowboys. Goldy and Old Heart Seven had been rubbed down and turned into a corral. Soon the Ranger and his young friend were tucking away a hearty meal prepared by Miss Rutledge. They turned in early, only the sentinels remaining on duty around the Double R.

The sun was up and the day warm as Hatfield and Buck sighted Cypress Town on the blue, winding bayou. Stands of timber, white oak, cypress and other trees broke the low range. The lagoon was sparkling in the brilliant light, with the

[Turn page]

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narrow protective island visible from the north terminus of which smoke was rising.

"That's where the labor camp stands, Buck. We better split up and go in separately. I may need you for spyin' work later. Ain't much to the settlement, is there?"

"Two flips and a shake of a calf's tail, that's all."

"The Eel may be around but I don't figger he had much of a peek at us last evenin'. We'll hope for the best, anyhow. It's plain Anguila is rustlin' beef to feed the canal workers, and takin' horses for drawin' scoops and such chores. He handles strongarm jobs for Boggs and that hombre they call the Admiral."

Buck said adios and drew off the road while the tall officer jogged into Cypress Town on his golden sorrel. The sluggish bayou wound inland, its margins thick with growth in some areas. The town dock space was kept fairly clear save for weeds.

A glance around sufficed to take in the sleepy place, a scrofulous plaza where the grass had trouble coming up because of the salt spray and sand, cabins and a few larger homes, a general store, three saloons, the largest called the Dolphin, a livery stable, feed and hardware store. In the lagoon showed a few small sails of fishermen. Shrimp, cove oysters and food fishes were taken in the vicinity.

For a weekday there was an unusual number of saddle horses standing outside the Dolphin, so the Ranger went on and cut up the lane leading to its rear, where he dismounted and dropped rein over a cypress wood bar. Discreet investigation showed that the Eel, the sinuous Mexican outlaw, and a score of roughs were at the bar. Hatfield did not enter but went down the line to a smaller oasis where he took a seat and waited.

He liked to get the feel of a spot and situation before going into action. From what Rutledge and Watkins had said there was much more to this than a rustler attack and he must fully discover the Eel's connections.

After an hour Buck Robertson came jogging in on Old Heart Seven. The lanky youth slumped in his saddle, looking like a country bumpkin come to town on an errand. He turned along Ocean Avenue, Cypress' fancy title for its main way parallel to the shore and ending at the public dock. The saloons and store and many of the larger homes fronted on ocean.

Hatfield became alert as Buck passed the Dolphin. There was a chance the Eel would recognize the rider or the mustang but Buck was not molested. He turned into a vacant corral and unsaddled Old Heart Seven. Next he went to the store and emerged carrying a package. He was eating candy or cake he had bought. He strolled up and down the rickety wooden sidewalk, crossing the street to take in the sights, which was soon accomplished. The youth went back toward the pier and Hatfield could see him bending down as he rolled over several rocks. Then Buck sat down on the stringpiece, unwound a cotton fishline, baited the hook with the worm he had found. Legs dangling and jaws working on taffy, he settled to his angling.

The Ranger smiled to himself. All boys liked fishing and Buck was no exception. He had found a way to pass the time, and yet be on deck to observe what was going on.

The noon heat came, the breeze dying and the air was humid, steaming. It was siesta time.

Nothing much seemed to happen in Cypress Town. It was still and the Ranger dozed in his chair in the saloon. A customer came and went now and again or a horseman moved slowly along the sandy street. Hatfield didn't miss anything.

LATE that afternoon he heard the tug whistle toot three short blasts. Soon came the throbbing chugs of the steam engine. He went to the front window and watched the powerful little vessel pass the landing. It was drawing a barge with a superstructure, and went slowly up Cypress Bayou.

Odors of frying meat and other foods cooking told that soon supper would be served. The sun was low, tangent to the western horizon as the Ranger sighted Porfirio Palacio. The snaky Mexican rode from the Dolphin, accompanied by two armed retainers. The Eel took a faint trail leading west along the bayou's south margin and before long was hidden from Hatfield by timber and brush fringing the winding inlet.

Hatfield went out, checked up. The

Dolphin was the headquarters of the Eel and his band. He saddled his sorrel and followed Palacio. As he cut past the dock, Buck was winding in his line and Hatfield gave him a quick wave as he swung after the Eel.

Half a mile up the bayou the tug had pulled in. The barge was connected with the low shore by a gangplank. The mounts belonging to the Eel and his friends stood there. With the gathering darkness lamps had been lighted and the barge ports glowed. Hatfield had to wait another forty minutes before night fell so he could get in close enough. He left Goldy hidden off the path and drew in on foot. The tide was receding and the barge was near enough so he could grasp the narrow side and pull himself across the gap.

Voices and the clink of glasses told that those aboard were eating and drinking, unaware or contemptuous of any threat. Inching along the dark side of the barge house he crouched under an open window. The Eel and two others were dining at a circular table, and there were more men in adjoining cabins.

He had no difficulty in picking out the wide, squat Sharkey Boggs. Blue tattoos showed on the tough chief's brawny arms and hairy chest. His face was red and coarse, the inflamed nose, marked by a white scar, showing how heavily he imbibed. Hatfield concluded that the third man, a large fellow in a blue suit with gold anchor buttons, must be the Admiral. Black sideburns, dark, deepset eyes marked him. And before long Hatfield heard Palacio address him as "Senor Admiral," while Commodore Boggs called him "Luckelew." Both showed respect in conferring with their chief. They were busily stowing away fancy foods and liquor.

Evidently the Eel had been describing the fiasco at the Double R. "Senor Admiral, I tell you we need my brothair Rafael Palacio," advised the Eel. "He has plenty hombres who wipe up Rutledge, *si.*"

"I'm in favor of more power," Boggs said, nodding. "I'm still worried about Drake and French. They're too quiet."

Luckelew shrugged. "I'll think it over. I'm losin' patience with Rutledge and I may call in your brother, Eel. The outside channel's nearly completed and soon we'll be ready for the bayou."

Hatfield listened as long as possible, taking in what was said. Once the Admiral banged his clenched fist on the table so that the glasses danced, shouting, "I'll kill any man who gets in my way!" He began whistling a familiar sea chantey, "Blow The Man Down."

It was ten o'clock when Hatfield returned to Cypress Town. He hunted around for Buck but his friend was not in the spot where they had agreed to meet. He concluded that Buck must have turned in although like most youths Buck never went to bed early if he could get out of it. The Ranger stopped at the corral where Old Heart Seven had been left. Buck's chunky gray whinnied to him in a complaining way and Hatfield found he had no water and that there were no signs he had been fed. A night wrangler at the nearby livery stable sold him some hay and lent him a bucket so the officer might tend to Old Heart Seven. Hatfield was surprised for Buck was usually most solicitous over his equine comrade and saw to his horse before himself.

Cypress Town slept save for some of the Eel's followers in the Dolphin and a few chronic drinkers. Hatfield took care of Goldy and slept in a blanket in a deserted shed.

HE WAS up with the dawn. There was no sign of Buck and he had a bite to eat and took up his post at Pablo's, the small saloon down the line from the Dolphin. Certainly Buck should come to water and feed Old Heart Seven.

But the morning passed with no Buck. The settlement was too small for the lad to be around and not show. If he had left town he would have taken his mount. Some of the Eel's men moved here and there. The steam tug, without the barge, which must have been left moored up the bayou. stopped for a time at the town landing. Sharkey Boggs rolled up Ocean Avenue, entered the Dolphin where he remained for about an hour. The Eel lay low in the big saloon.

When dark again fell Hatfield was greatly concerned. It had become obvious something had happened to Buck Robertson. "Wonder if one of the cusses finally recognized him?" he thought.

He must find Buck. He could not return

to Anita and face her with such terrible tidings. Checking his Colts, he left Pablo's and went quickly along the wooden sidewalk toward the Dolphin.

Hatfield paused on the stoop to look over the half doors. On the right was the long counter, with bartenders busy serving armed toughs, the Eel's boys and a scattering of citizens. On the left were tables and a gambling room, to the rear sleeping quarters and the kitchens. Porfirio Palacio was in there, facing to the front. He was playing blackjack with several cronies.

Hatfield made sure his heavy Colts would slide without snagging in the supple, oiled holsters. Then he pushed inside.

CHAPTER V

Shanghaied

DURING the brief moment usual when a newcomer entered such a place, men looked at the tall Ranger. The Eel glanced up from his cards and then unconcernedly resumed the game. Hatfield was watching for any abnormal reaction but there was none.

He wore no uniform, no badge to mark him as a law officer and turned to the bar, ringing a silver dollar on the counter. A barkeeper came to set a bottle of redeye and a glass before him and he slouched on the board, one spurred boot hooked in the brass rail. Nobody seemed surprised or excited at his presence. He was prepared to shoot a way out if need be but it was not called for and soon the Dolphin settled back to its ordinary state, the buzz of talk, the clink of glass, the rattle of dice on a table the chief sounds.

Wet sawdust was on the uneven floor, a stale odor of liquor mingling with the smell of hot oil lamps hanging from cross rafters. The proprietor had shown some artistic skill in decorating the saloon. Stuffed denizens of the sea, fishing tackle, drawings and pictures of sailing and steam vessels hung around the walls.

The ceiling was painted blue with signs of the Zodiac across it, the walls wavy with green simulating the disturbed surface of the ocean, a mermaid, whale or seahorse here and there. On shelves reposed collections of sea fans, coral formations, urchins, polished conches, old sextants and compasses, hand-carved ship models. The brass timepiece over the mirror was a ship's clock which gave out bells every half hour, while under it was a stuffed, varnished dolphin of extraordinary size, symbol of the establishment.

After Hatfield had been at the bar for a while a chubby man with rubicund cheeks and a winning smile slid up the rail and passed the time of day. He had an old brown Stetson pushed back on his round head, he wore a homespun shirt and leather pants, bandanna and runover halfboots with Mexican spurs.

"Howdy, suh, howdy! Nice night, ain't it? I sure love the sea breeze, don't you?"

"Sounds fine," agreed Hatfield.

The saloon acquaintance wore a gun. The Ranger thought he might be one of the Eel's followers. The seams around his pale-blue eyes showed he was more calculating than his friendly manner indicated, and the Colt handle had a hand-polished gleam.

"Let me buy this round," he begged. "I get lonesome drinkin' all by myself."

Nobody else apparently was paying any attention to the two. Hatfield gave a brief nod. The chubby one rapped on the counter and new liquor was served.

"Come far?" asked Hatfield's companion.

"Yes and no. Depends on what you call far."

"Ha-ha! That's a good one. I must remember it, suh. Here's how!"

They drank up. Hatfield paid for the next round.

"Say, you're a mighty strong lookin' Indian." Chubby seemed to realize this for the first time as he studied the tall, powerful Ranger. "How would you like a nice, easy job for big pay?"

"Doin' what?"

"Oh, a little diggin' and such. They're cuttin' through the bar outside, savvy? Feller like you could be a foreman in no time at all and just stand around givin' orders. What do you say? I can put you next to the hombre who does the hirin'."

Now Hatfield was sure. Branch Watkins had told him that Sharkey Boggs was taking on all the pick-and-shovel labor he could find and Chubby must be one of the

band's agents, as well as a member of Palacio's crew. He was seeking recruits for the hard tasks on the barrier island.

"It don't sound like my style, suh," drawled the Ranger, after thinking it over.

"Come on, be a sport. It's a real chance to make yourself a pocketful of cash."

"No, thanks." Hatfield wished to see what the next move would be. He began to wonder. It was possible that Buck might have been spirited off along this type of channel.

CHUBBY stayed friendly, plying him with drink. The ship's clock tinkled six bells. Tobacco smoke slowly swirled around the hot lamp chimneys. "See that thin Mexican over at the back table?" said Chubby, nudging the tall man. "Keep away from him, he's tough. Shoot you like that." He snapped his finger.

Hatfield glanced over at the Eel. But he guessed Chubby wanted to turn his attention and from the corner of his eye saw the fat hand poised over his half-consumed drink.

He allowed plenty of time before swinging back. "I ain't huntin' trouble, suh. I aim to stay out of it." He shrugged and picked up the drink.

"That's the talk! But a man would be mighty safe on that island if he needed to be."

Chubby had loaded the whisky. Hatfield considered his next move. Besides the two heavy holster Colts he had a spare six-shooter hidden under his armpit. A dangerous plan occurred to him and he weighed its chances. If he lost he might be killed. But eager to locate Buck, he believed that the enemy's need for laborers might explain the youth's sudden disappearance. If he traveled the same route he should reach Buck.

Hatfield cupped the glass in his slim hand. "You say that Mexican is a quick-trigger artist?"

Chubby's eyes turned toward the Eel as the Ranger had expected they would. Hatfield let the whisky spill down the front of the bar into the sawdust, the act hidden by his cocked leg. When Chubby looked back the glass was at the tall man's lips, apparently drained.

"Yeah, that's Anguila, the Eel, fastest I ever see." Chubby licked his chops and a hidden, expectant amusement crossed his eyes.

After a few minutes the Ranger passed the back of his hand across his eyes. "I feel funny, suh. I better take the air."

"Wait a jiffy. I got a better idea." Chubby was very solicitous. "There's a bunk in the back room where you can lie down for a while, *amigo*. I'll help you." He gripped Hatfield's arm and supported the staggering, sagging Ranger down the room.

Nobody seemed to take any notice of a common enough sight, a friend assisting a man who had drunk too much. The Ranger decided however that the proprietor of the Dolphin, either through bribery or intimidation, must be closing his eyes to the band's operations in Cypress Town. A goodly profit would result from such a large patronage and the saloonkeeper could certainly afford to look the other way when necessary.

A couple of toughs at the lower end of the bar left their drinks and trailed after Chubby and Hatfield. Inside the back room, where Chubby steered him, Hatfield let his knees buckle. He collapsed on the mat, feigning unconsciousness.

The trio stood over their victim and Chubby chuckled. "Takes me to do it, gents. I ain't missed yet."

He stooped and drew Hatfield's two visible pistols. It was a crucial moment for the Ranger did not intend to let them entirely disarm him. He knew he could whip his armpit weapon and break away if he had to but he hoped to extend the game until he reached Buck Robertson. He stirred slightly and groaned and this checked further search.

"Take him down to the boat and run him over, boys," commanded Chubby.

One outlaw seized the booted ankles, the other took hold of his wrists and they started out the back way, supervised by the stout little killer. "Wow! This hombre weighs a ton," grunted one of the carriers. "Pick 'em smaller after this, Chubby."

"He'll be mighty good with a pick and shovel."

They were sweating and cursing by the time they hoisted Hatfield over the back of a saddled horse not far from the rear exit of the Dolphin. From there they jogged slowly to the town landing where they had several rowboats. The Ranger, giving out a histrionic groan now and then, was

loaded into a dory. "You boys take him across to camp," said Chubby "I'll see you later."

THE RANGER lay limp in the bottom of the smallboat as the toughs plied the oars, tholepins creaking as they moved across the still lagoon. Beaching on the sand at the north end of the island, they dragged him out and dumped him. His weight annoyed them. "Let's pull him along, Artie." Each grabbed an arm and unceremoniously yanked him to tent barracks set back from the beach. An armed sentinel came up and chuckled as he watched them laboring. Evidently he too was one of the Eel's boys.

They rolled him under the side of a canvas shelter. "That'll do it," Artie growled.

So far, so good, thought Hatfield. He listened to their receding steps before sitting up. Snores and heavy breathing sounded about him, he could make out dim shapes of sleeping men lying on blankets spread across the sand.

"Buck!" said the Ranger softly. He tried several times but his friend did not answer.

He peeked out at the flap. A couple of guards were slowly pacing around the lantern-lighted area of the labor camp. Other shelter shapes loomed nearby. Buck might be in one of them. He thought it over and decided to wait. He would probably be caught if he blundered around the unfamiliar spot and by spending a day on the island he could learn more concerning the foe's dispositions. He curled up, the bulk of the gun comforting under his arm. He could sleep on a hair trigger and several times jumped awake as the dull tread of a sentry neared the tent, but he was not disturbed.

At dawn shrill whistles blasted. Tough, armed overseers routed them out. The Ranger, towering over squat peons and the ordinary run of men, eagerly searched in the crush for Buck and soon he sighted his lean young comrade. Buck was dragging along with a group from another tent. His face was sallow under its tan, his tow-haired head bare, a crusted scar visible. Hatfield decided that they must have come up behind Buck and knocked him out.

Buck suddenly sighted Hatfield and his eyes, which were full of woe, lighted up. He started to call out but a quick shake of Hatfield's head warned him and he moved on. For the most part the laborers were of meek, dull types, inured to pick-and-shovel work. Some of them quarreled over the kettles of steaming coffee and mush served up at the open-hearth kitchen close to the barracks. Hatfield got his share and his presence enheartened Buck, who had brightened up.

The meal over, the men formed into lines, each commanded by an overseer. Hatfield sighted Chubby, the stout outlaw who had shanghaied him at the Dolphin. Chubby was walking with Commodore Sharkey Boggs, and pointed at the tall officer.

"Hey, you," sang out Boggs gruffly.

Wide and squat, a Navy revolver strapped at his burly waist, Boggs rolled Chubby trotting at his heels. Boggs' fists were knotty hams. His brawny arms were bared to the elbow and mermaid tattoos with a seaman's gait across the strand stood out while in the fair morning light his swollen, red features were particularly unpleasant. He had on blue pants and a merchant officer's cap with a gilt anchor insignia. He spread his feet as he looked up into the rugged face of the Ranger, and scowled with a bully's ill humor.

"You! You're new here. Grogan says you signed on for three months last night at the Dolphin."

Chubby looked a bit apprehensive, staying behind Boggs' elbow as he waved a dirty sheet of paper. "That's right. See, you wrote yore name, 'Jake Burns,' on this here contract."

"I don't remember," said the Ranger. "Maybe I had one too many."

Commodore Boggs swelled out his hogshead chest, hirsute growth sticking from the V of his shirt. "It's a bindin' agreement, mister. Either you work or we'll see to it that you do!"

Hatfield shrugged. "I don't mind, suh. Sea air's good for a man now and then."

Boggs and Chubby seemed relieved. "That's better," said the commodore. "We'll furnish you with fine grub. You'll eat beef at noon and suppertime." He called in his gruff voice to one of the overseers. "George, show this recruit the ropes." Boggs winked at George, who nodded and said, "Follow me."

HATFIELD'S meek acceptance of his fate disarmed them. He marched off in George's gang and took in the sights, the deep channel nearly completed from the sea into the lagoon, the dredger getting up steam inside the isle, the numerous workers, the barges and smaller craft in the shallows. Southward the island widened out and rose, patches of woods and rocks visible. He noted bunches of cattle and horses, scoops and a great deal of other equipment. The Admiral and his fancy barge were not in sight. Hatfield decided that probably Luckelew's floating home was still moored up Cypress Bayou. Sharkey Boggs' steam tug was on hand although later in the day the commodore went aboard and chugged across the lagoon toward the bayou.

Wooden chests, marked *Drake & French* on top, were opened. They contained hand tools and Hatfield drew a pickax, which he wielded under the watchful eyes of his overseer. A levee was being raised to prevent the sea from washing in during storms. Fill taken from the new channel was being used for this. The sun came up and the humid heat grew intense. Sweat poured from the laborers, stained by malodorous black muck scooped up by dredges. Teamsters' whips and cursing voices rang out as horses were put to their jobs. Up the line the slender Buck tried to hold his end up with a shovel. He was naked to the waist, the lad's gaunt ribs standing out as he strained at his task.

Buck was in another crew and it was not until they knocked off for dinner that Hatfield was able to draw close enough for a word with his friend. Cooks had plenty of barbecued beef ready for the hungry men. They could eat all they wished, taking it for themselves from long, shallow pans. Coffee sweetened with molasses was also furnished, and some loaves of stale bread and sea biscuits.

Buck was panting as he sank to the sand in the shade of a tent. "I feel terrible, Jim," he complained. "They hit me over the head when I wouldn't sign up to work for 'em. Did yuh see to Old Heart Seven?"

"Yeah, I told the livery stable wrangler to feed and water him and Goldy if I didn't show up to do it." Hatfield was concerned at the boy's aspect. Buck's cheeks, while pale under his tan, had red blotches in them and the Ranger decided he must have some fever, perhaps from a slight concussion due to the blow he had received. Buck would not eat much but drank coffee and rested. "We'll go out of here tonight, Buck. I let these cusses fetch me here on purpose. Figured I might find you this way. I got a gun. When camp quiets down I'll crawl up on the dark side of your tent, savvy? Be ready to roll out when you hear me scratch."

"I can't wait to get free, Jim. They knock you down if you don't work hard enough."

The day dragged along. After an hour's rest they were marched back to the digging operations.

Twice during the hot afternoon, the overseer struck Buck, sending him sprawling to the sand.

It was close to midnight before Hatfield deemed it wise to start the escape. Several armed toughs had been hanging around, talking with the sentinels and some of the workers were wakeful. He wormed under the shadowed side of his tent and lay flat for a time, watching the pacing guards. They had put a couple more on since Branch Watkins had eluded them, no doubt due to the successful escape. Lanterns strung on posts lighted up the barracks area.

Hatfield had purposely left the black muck on his face so it would not reflect light. He kept flat as a stalking Apache, crawling toward the shelter where Buck waited.

Reaching this, he scratched on the rough canvas and in a jiffy Buck pushed out. "Jim!" breathed the lad.

"You all right, Buck?" whispered Hatfield.

"I reckon. I don't feel too good, though." He was game, sick as he felt.

"I'd like to take one of those rowboats. We'll creep to the beach. Follow in my line and stop, put your head down when I do."

IT WENT well and they covered the hundred yards to the wet sand left by the ebbing tide. One small boat was lying off by itself and Hatfield reached its canted side. He squatted to feel for oars but there were none in it. That was bad luck. "We'll try the next one. Careful, Buck."

The slight drop from the camp helped hide them from the sentries. The next

boat south was in a group of six. None had any oars. Hatfield was chagrined but decided that again it must have been Watkins' escape which had caused them to tighten up their guard.

Keeping in the faint shadow cast by the bulge of the dry land which rose southward, they crawled along, out of the lanternlight. Here were quarters for the Eel's men and the bosses. A fire burned low in a stone hearth. Coffee was kept hot for sentries coming or going off duty. There were several dories in front of this overseers' camp.

But there were no oars in the boats. Hatfield lay alongside a craft, Buck breathing heavily by him. The Ranger studied the camp. Several pairs of oars rested against the side of a crude shack which was built of driftwood not far from the tents.

"Stick here, Buck," he whispered. "I'll get a pair."

But luck was against him. He had nearly reached the shack when a man carrying a lantern came from it and turned toward him.

The outlaw saw the long shape lying on the sand.

"Who's that?" he demanded.

The Ranger sprang at him, got him by the throat, cut him off, the lantern flying off and going out as it landed. But there were more of the enemy outside at the cookfire.

They heard the sounds and swung at him, saw him as he hurled the strangling bandit to the strand.

Guns were rising. Hatfield whirled and pelted back to Buck. "Come on, we got to run for it!"

Orders to stop being disobeyed, the outlaws opened fire and the lead whistled around the heads of the running pair. They kept on south, the water-packed sand offering good footing. The hue-and-cry began as armed retainers routed out to pursue them.

Buck lagged after a couple of hundred yards dash. He was gasping for wind, sagging in the middle. Ahead dark stands of timber and jutting bluffs holding back the Gulf offered a prospect of hiding. "Come on, Buck."

The youth strained a few steps farther but could not speak. He suddenly fell flat on his face, rolled over, lay there.

CHAPTER VI

Trapped

HATFIELD slid to a stop, turned and bent over his friend. Buck was senseless, the fever and fatigue having claimed their toll. The Ranger picked him up and slung the slender lad over his shoulder, loping on for cover.

"Escape! Fetch them bull's-eyes! Saddle some horses!" Leaders among the outlaws were shouting orders.

Hatfield reached a patch of brush, breathed more easily as he put it between himself and the enemy. The ground was sandy but big rock ledges jutted out and he climbed higher, pushing toward the ocean shore. Woods grew on the levels not flooded by the salt water and he took to them, aware there were cattle and horses in the gloom about him.

He kept going, hunting a hole in which he might hide with Buck. He had a gun but would not use it unless he must. His cartridge belts had been confiscated at the Dolphin and he had only a few spare shells in his pockets.

The Ranger knew he was trapped on the island, with many armed enemies hunting him. But he would not give up. He came to the margin of the woods. The moon bathed the rippled Gulf, small waves running white across the shallows to dissipate on the narrow beach below the cliffs.

"Got to hide," he muttered.

Buck was still limp as a sack of oats. The mighty Ranger looked back, the grim face touched by silver light. Like the baying of a hound pack the voices of his pursuers filtered to him. They were slowly coming along, spread out to sweep him up. Stabbing lantern beams searched for the quarry.

The bluff before him was abrupt but a few paces to his right was a negotiable slide. He dug in his high heels, and descended, Buck heavy on his shoulder. He knew his footprints would remain in the damp sand so he waded into the sea, moving ankle-deep in the water. Not far to the south he saw what he had been looking and hoping for, the black mouth of a cave undercut into the crumbling rock.

There were patches of shells, and boulders half buried in the shifting sand and he crossed to the fallen shale on them. The gunhands were still in the woods but coming his way, calling to one another as they searched the brush, startling the cattle and horses lurking in the dark areas. He could see the lights now and then.

The cavern proved large enough to conceal them. By sense of touch he smoothed a place for Buck to lie, then crouched by the youth, listening. He was ready to fight it out if he had to but, although he caught dim noises for the next hour, the hunters missed his turnoff and pushed south, believing he was still in the bush.

Hatfield drew his six-shooter and sat leaning against the rock, a shielding arm over the sleeping Buck. He dozed fitfully, waking alertly from time to time.

The streak of lightening gray touched the distant horizon as dawn came up over the Gulf. Buck was tossing and moaning and the Ranger could tell from touching him that he had some fever. Now he could make out details of the cave, the low ceiling, the jagged walls. The floor was sand and shells, water-washed stones here and there. Old seaweed and dried sticks extended to the back of the cave, showing that during the violent storms which sometimes swept these regions the rising, lashed waters drove through.

The tide was rising but it was a normal one and he did not fear being caught by the sea. He must have water to give Buck and he was very thirsty himself. He had counted on reaching the mainland the previous night and had no canteen. However, again the sea proved friendly. He stole out in the new light and not far off picked up a bottle which had been brought in by the tide. Fastening it in his belt he climbed to the woods. There were cattle around, and horses and he read two or three brands, one RR, which was Madison Rutledge's.

WATCHING for enemies, the camp half a mile north of him, Hatfield snaked through the woods. He followed the cattle trails and located a small pool of potable water where he filled his bottle and satisfied his own thirst. He was back at Buck's side before the huge red sun rose, beautiful on the ocean.

He spent the day nursing Buck. Occasionally a distant shout reached his ears. No doubt the Admiral's men were making a daytime search but they did not come down to the strip of beach.

Buck awoke and begged for water. The sun grew very hot and it was pleasant enough in the sea cave. Hatfield and the youth dozed intermittently and the rest helped Buck regain strength. Careful examination of his head injury told the Ranger it was only a severe bump with a small scalp gash from which the blood had oozed. The worst shock was wearing off.

Night finally fell over them. "We're goin' to steal a boat, Buck, oars or not. We can't stick here any longer."

"I can walk, Jim."

"I'll carry you if need be. I got this piece of board I found on the beach, we don't want to lose it." There was driftwood along the base of the irregular cliffs and the Ranger had picked up a six-inch-wide timber about four feet long.

They were both hungry but tightened their belts and finishing the tepid water in the bottle, started the trek. Hatfield boosted Buck to the top of the steep bluff and they cautiously stole through the inky woods. To the north lights marked the enemy camp.

The tide was starting out, sweeping north through the new channel. The Ranger left his comrade at the eastern rim of the chaparral, with the lagoon between them and the mainland. Across the mile-wide inner waterway they could see the glow of Cypress Town.

This time Hatfield gave up any hope of getting oars. He wormed up the open stretch of beach and eased a small dory from the group out in front of the guards' quarters. There were enemies in the tents and he glimpsed two or three dark figures of moving sentinels but so stealthy was he that there was no alarm. Carefully he worked the small boat south, around the brief point, beached it and picked up Buck. All he had was the piece of board to use as a paddle but this was preferable to wading, for there would be areas of the lagoon bottom where a man would sink to his waist or farther in the viscous mud.

Buck lay in the bottom of the dory and the Ranger pushed off. It was not long before they discovered it leaked seriously. The run of the ebbing tide picked them up and the officer braced in the stern seat,

paddling with all his might. He must make enough westing so that he would not show when the little craft passed the camp.

It was a hard fight. Sweat poured from him and his arms ached from the unusual exertion. The tide was gaining speed but he managed to paddle the dory halfway over the lagoon before its sideways motion carried it north of the enemy positions. Buck took a seat for the water was sploshing inches deep in the bottom and there was no bailer.

Several times the keel grounded on sand or mud bars and Hatfield pushed off, able to pole along for a time before the water grew too deep. The settlement's lights guided him but he was unable to reach the south side of Cypress Bayou. Instead the tide brought the dory some hundreds of yards on the north of the bayou's mouth. When at last, three hours after leaving the island, they staggered to the mainland beach, the big Ranger was near the end of his tether. He sank down, panting, to regain his breath.

When Hatfield rose he calculated it was close to midnight. "We'll walk and see about crossin' when we get there" he said.

They entered a swamp where reeds grew, towering cypresses darkening the section. Two or three times heavy splashings told they had come close to big alligators. Grimly they kept going, soaked with salt water and splattered with evil-smelling black mud.

THE widening bayou blocked them, Cypress Town so near and yet so far. The inlet narrowed as it penetrated inland and they worked up the north bank, the brush and reeds very thick.

"Look at those lights," said Buck, gripping his tall friend's arm.

Hatfield was looking. The red flares could be seen through the woods. "Stay here till I check, Buck," he whispered.

He moved cautiously on. Something was up and he peered at the moving torches, burning pitch on wooden sticks. There was a small wharf on the bayou, and the blackened remains of cabins up the shore. "I guess that's where the fishermen lived," he decided.

The Eel showed. At the wharf lay a barge, attached to it Commodore Sharkey Boggs' steam tug. Horsemen were easing cattle across a wide gangplank to the barge. There were thirty to forty of the toughs on hand.

"This is how they supply the island with meat," he thought.

There was a sudden change in the tempo of the thieves' operations. Most of them jumped from their saddles gripping carbines and swinging to face inland. The Eel took command, waving his fighters to cover behind the cabin ruins, flanking the trail to the landing. Sharkey Boggs and his crew set themselves on the tug, rifles leveled.

Hardly had these dispositions been made when a party of riders, a dozen men in range garb, surged in. Hatfield was too far away to take part in the flaring, violent action. The leader of the horsemen loomed large in brown leather and Stetson. "I've caught you, rustlers!" he bawled, furious at the thieves he had come upon in the act of stealing beefs. "I'm Vern Lynn. You got a bunch of my steers there and Double R stock as well! Throw down."

Lynn had more courage than judgment although most of the Eel's outlaws were squatted down out of his sight. Such Texans would fight anyhow and Lynn spurred close to the barge and tug. Cows still on dry land swung and ran off, panicked by the loud noises.

The riders were between the shack ruins. A volley belched from the Eel's rustlers, tearing into the mounted cowboys. Sharkey Boggs and his aides pulled trigger, down behind the low bulwark of the tug's rail.

Lynn was first to go down, riddled with lead. He crashed off his plunging black mustang and lay in the fairway, bullets striking him again and again. Two more horses fell, riders turned to run for it. The rest, cowboys following Lynn, realizing the terrible trap, ripped rein and sought to escape. Many carried away slugs and their hasty six-gun fire was futile.

It was over before Hatfield could do anything about it. Lynn was dead, the avengers beaten off.

The officer watched as Boggs came out and conferred with the Eel. He could see the commodore's teeth gleaming in pleasure and Boggs slapped the snaky Mexican on the back, congratulating him on a job well done.

Gunhands tossed Lynn's body into the lagoon. Some of the escaped steers were

rounded up and driven into the barge. Commodore Boggs climbed to the pilot house and swung the tug out into the channel, towing the barge load of fresh beef toward the island.

The Eel and his followers mounted their horses and slowly moved away. A couple of miles in, the bayou narrowed and the north-south coastal highway crossed it over a log bridge. . . .

The enemy gone, Hatfield returned to Buck, giving him a quick account of what had occurred. "That Lynn was a friend of Rutledge's. The Admiral and his crew will serve all these ranchers the same way."

"I'm starvin', Jim."

"That's a good sign, Buck. Means you're better if you want to eat. I think we better take a chance and swim for it. It ain't far across and we're too tuckered to walk all that way."

There was not much current, only the tide slowly moving the murky waters of the bayou. A stray alligator might be lurking near but they had to gamble on that. Usually the amphibians would not attack man.

"Keep a hand on my shoulder now," ordered the Ranger, as they waded in and launched off, feet sucking in the silt.

SLOWLY they pushed through reeds on the south shore and reached dry ground. It was late and only a few lights marked Cypress Town, not far away to the west.

As they trudged along, soaked to the skin, Hatfield shook water from the six-shooter he had so carefully preserved, drying it in the air.

"If I ever bump into that Chubby cuss I'll get back my Colts and belts," he promised.

They sneaked into the sleeping town by the back way. Only the saloons were still lighted and with the Eel out the little village appeared deserted. But the Ranger's keen ears caught the drum of hoofs. He seized Buck's arm and they crouched at the dark side of a structure, staring west from which direction came the sounds.

Horsemen swept into Cypress Town, the moonlight glinting on rifles and shotguns at the ready across their pommels. "If that's the Eel they made it mighty fast," muttered the Ranger.

The newcomers rushed up to the Dolphin, leaping from the saddles and running in at the doors. Some trotted to cover the rear. Yet after a few minutes they came out, mounted and moved back. "It ain't Palacio and his boys," Hatfield told Buck. "Never saw 'em before."

In the shafts from entries and windows he had been able to make out enough to tell that these riders were not the Eel's crew.

They flitted to the vacant shed where Hatfield had spent the night after arriving in town. He had left his blanket and gear there and told Buck to wrap up and lie down until he could fetch something to eat.

He moved cautiously, aware his enemies might pull in at any moment and wondering about the party he had seen at the Dolphin. Pablo's, the small saloon in which he had sat while spying on the Eel, invited him but he hesitated about entering. His bedraggled appearance would cause talk and bring his foes upon him. He had money in a belt next his skin. Turning toward the general store he kept to the shadows, soon reaching it, for the place was not far away.

Nothing in the settlement was far from other structures for they huddled close together and it was only a short stroll to anywhere.

The store was darkened, the front door bolted. But he found a window at the side which slid up at his gentle push. He climbed in and in the dimness, aided by sense of smell, located cheese, salt fish, the cracker barrel and canned goods. He filled a bag and leaving more than enough on the counter to pay for what he had taken, silently departed, closing the window after him. He had not disturbed the proprietor, who slept in the rear of the long building.

Back at the shed, Buck and Hatfield greedily consumed the food.

"Now for a real sleep," said the Ranger enthusiastically.

As he lay down he heard through the natural telegraph of the earth the thud of hoofs but concluded it was the Eel and his killers coming home to the Dolphin.

But a few minutes later bursts of heavy gunfire, shouts of furious fighters, sent the tall officer outside to check up. A battle was raging in Ocean Avenue.

CHAPTER VII

Opposition

SCORES of horsemen filled the wide way, slugging it out in Cypress Town. Shotguns, Colts and carbines flamed as cursing opponents faced one another. One faction was commanded by Porfirio Palacio, the Eel. Hatfield recognized the sinuous Mexican as Anguila passed a shaft of light from the Dolphin's doorway. The second bunch was the party which he had noted earlier just as they reached the settlement.

Both sides were mounted, spurring their mustangs and zigzagging, shooting as they moved, hurling threats along with lead. Braggarts and showoffs would whoop it up, spurt out and empty a shotgun or pistol at the foe, then circle back as bullets whizzed too close. One side would recoil, rally and return to the fray, stopping the advance of the other.

The intrigued Ranger watched the scrap, unaware of its meaning. It might be two outlaw bands fighting it out for control over the territory.

The Eel held the road in front of the Dolphin while the other group had its rear to the bayou. They were evenly matched and while a few were slashed by flying metal, fair aim was difficult at moving targets in such faint light. They surged up and down, mustangs flying through lanes to dash around and emerge from between houses, gun-blaring riders seeking to catch the opposition on the side.

A lull came after guns had been emptied. Only scattered explosions disturbed the peace. Citizens peeked from windows but such neutrals did not come out to take part in the conflict.

As though by signal, after a short breather, the Eel and the other captain once more hurled their fighters into the fray. Hatfield was toward the dock on Cypress Bayou. He grew aware of the steam tug's approach and Commodore Sharkey Boggs brought in his boat. Armed retainers jumped ashore, led by Boggs. These reinforcements for the Eel were afoot but this gave them an advantage in a standing fight. They could take steadier aim than a marksman on a plunging mustang.

Boggs caught the Eel's foes in the back. The strangers soon felt this fresh element and began melting off.

The Ranger had particularly noted the actions of a tall fellow in black leather, a "Nebraska" hat strapped low over his brow. He seemed to be a chief, urging on those who had come after the Eel. He rode a powerful brown gelding, a first-class animal trained for battle.

Boggs' swift advance trapped a knot of riders in a blind pocket formed by two homes and a barn. With a mighty roar the fellow in black charged alone against Boggs and so violently brave was his run that he forced the commodore to recoil enough so the others could drive out, cross Ocean Avenue and escape westward to open ground. Instead of spurring along with the friends he had saved, the leader tightened rein and turned east. Boggs and his men were throwing shotgun and carbine slugs his way as he whirled from their sight, last to leave the main road.

The store was built on piles driven into the sandy earth, as were many of Cypress Town's edifices. Hatfield was able to push back under the house as the black-leathered figure swirled around it. The Ranger heard the sobbing gasps of the brown gelding and the man's alarmed tones.

"Keep goin', Chesty! Take me out of here, feller. I savvy you're hit. So am I. Hold up, boy!"

Chesty had a thoroughbred's courage but he was dying. The gelding put every ounce of remaining strength into a terrific forward lunge but crashed as he landed. The rider kicked loose his toes from the tapped stirrups. He was not pinned under the heavy body but his frantic jump caused him to strike the side of the store.

He did not rise but lay crumpled near Chesty who was heaving his last. Hatfield could see a widening, dark smudge on the man's right cheek. The snap or the impact against the wall could have broken his neck.

THEY were shouting and firing in Ocean Avenue as some of the Eel's gunsters pursued the broken remnants of the attackers. "They'll kill you if you don't run, mister," muttered the Ranger

though it was plain the other was senseless. He had fought well if not too wisely and the odds had been against him.

Hatfield was on the lookout for allies against the Admiral and his crew. He would never compromise with outlaws but the unconscious victim had not been proved such. After all, the rancher, Vern Lynn, had been killed striking the Eel. And the spunk of the man in the Nebraska hat commended him to the tall officer. Hatfield quickly crawled out and touched him.

Loss of blood from wounds coupled with a glancing crack on the skull when he had jumped sideways off his expiring mount, had knocked him out. The Ranger picked him up by the arms, shouldered him and dogtrotted to the rear of the store. In there the terrified owner and his wife were lying low until the leaden hurricane abated.

The shed where Buck waited was close at hand and Hatfield reached it without being observed from the street. He laid out the tall stranger, and unbuckled his cartridge belt, for he had lost his own when he had allowed Chubby to shanghai him at the Dolphin.

"Who's that?" whispered Buck.

"Don't know. He was fightin' Boggs and the Eel, Buck. Here's a spare Colt for yuh."

A more careful checkup told him that the man he had rescued had no mortal injuries. He had been slashed by several pellets, no doubt buckshot. "Watch him careful, Buck," ordered the Ranger. "Squat by him with your gun ready. Keep him from cryin' out and if he won't listen to reason, shoot him, savvy? We can't take chances tonight."

Face and hands smeared with black dirt to kill the sheen of his flesh, the stealthy Ranger once more crept forth to spy on the foe. He pulled himself to the low, flat roof of the livery stable and wormed to the front. The Dolphin blazed with lights as thirsty gunslingers threw themselves from their saddles and stalked in to drink up. Boggs and the Eel were in triumphant control of Cypress Town.

Flat on the tarpaper roof, Hatfield waited. He recognized a number of killers, Commodore Boggs and Palacio, even saw the short, stout Chubby who was parading up and down with a real swagger. Chubby wore the Ranger's heavy Colts which he had confiscated the night he had sent the officer to the island.

Things were quieting down. Riders who had gone out in pursuit of the losers straggled in, ready for wassail. Citizens were returning to their beds, thankful the storm was over.

After a time several horsemen came from the bayou trail, among them the bulking figure of Admiral Luckelew, chief of the organization. Evidently he had been sent for, messengers going to his palatial barge up the line. Luckelew wore his uniform and his black bearded face was wreathed in a grin.

The Eel and Boggs came out on the veranda of the Dolphin to greet their leader. Luckelew clapped both his lieutenants on the back. They went inside. Hatfield moved to the edge of the stable roof, keeping low. He could see through the top of an open window into the main bar.

Luckelew and his aides were in there drinking but soon the three bosses proceeded to the rear and disappeared.

"Talkin' it over, I reckon," decided Hatfield.

He moved to the back of the roof, hoping the trio might be in one of the rooms on that side, but had no luck. Letting himself into the lane, he slid closer to the Dolphin's rear exit. He froze, pushed against the dark wall, as a man emerged and looked around. Hatfield recognized Chubby.

Chubby's eyes were not yet accustomed to the gloom and the Ranger made no sound. The stout figure slowly came his way.

Probably Chubby had been sent out on patrol.

WITH the deadly lunge of a striking panther, Hatfield was upon him. A vise-like hand shut off Chubby's startled yip, a knee and a slugging punch did the trick. Chubby never knew what had hit him. Swiftly Hatfield carried him around the service shed behind the Dolphin, trussed and gagged him. Hatfield then took back his belts and pistols, and let Chubby lie.

Scouting, he found he had not been observed. He walked lightly across the lane and up the narrow, dark sideway

between the Dolphin and another building, crouched under the open window of the private chamber in which sat Luckelew, the Eel and Boggs. They were drinking and talking.

"So you saw Ned French and Tim Drake," rumbled the Admiral.

"I did, suh," insisted Commodore Boggs. "I told you they'd come for us."

"We beat zem off," boasted the Eel. He was very proud of himself.

Admiral Luckelew was immersed in thought for a time and his aides respectfully awaited the result. The dark deepset eyes glowed in the square, bearded face and the watching Ranger felt he had never seen a more evil visage. "He could play Satan himself without changin' a whisker," he thought.

"This is too good a chance to muff, boys." Luckelew was ready to deliver his orders. "As you know there are half a dozen men in town I want to dispose of, and tonight's the time. We can blame it all on Drake and French."

"*Si*," nodded the sinuous Eel.

SHARKEY BOGGS shrugged.

"Whatever you say, suh. But how do we go about it?"

"Mask your men," went on the Admiral. "Send half to the west and have 'em roar into town, Eel, make a show of fightin', fire over each other's heads, then retreat. In the night nobody can identify the rank-and-file rider."

"Let's see if I got this list straight," growled Boggs. He took a folded sheet from his pocket, shook it out and held it to the lamp. "John Test. Samuel Morton. Philip Todd. Ben Corrigan. Arthur Young. Dave Ince."

"That's right," nodded Luckelew. "Between 'em they hold ninety percent of the land around the settlement, includin' the bayou shore. Rutledge and his friends own the other side and farther inland."

Hatfield's blood ran cold as he heard the Admiral calling for the death of innocent men. He had no way of discovering where the half dozen doomed by Luckelew lived, for he could not show himself to inquire even had he the time for it. Icy sweat came out on his forehead as he bit his lip, backing away. Alone, he must try to save these new victims of the terrible Admiral.

CHAPTER VIII

Alarm

JIM HATFIELD, away from the Dolphin, flitted from spot to spot, racking his brain for a way out. He might rouse an honest inhabitant and ask him to warn the marked six. Yet there was scarcely time for all that, and he had no way of locating such a party. He could expose himself thus to an ally of the Admiral's or be shot down if somebody grew alarmed at his knocking and called for help.

As he watched, some of Palacio's gunhands began quietly leaving the lighted center, moving in twos and threes across the bare plaza and disappearing in the gloom. No doubt they were to form the supposed counterattack by Drake and French, under cover of which the townsmen could be slain.

While staring at the departing figures, Hatfield noted the two uprights, surmounted by a crossbar, standing at the southeast corner of the square. He had seen this before but it was so usual in these towns that he had not considered it before. From the bar depended a curved length of railroad iron. A sledgehammer on a long chain was fastened to one post. Along with water barrels and buckets set at strategic points this was part of the fire fighting system.

"That's the ticket!" he decided.

Goldy was in the livery stable corral, unsaddled. But there were plenty of mounts on hand and it was not hard to snake a rein off the hitchrail and lead away the mouse-hued mustang to whose bit rings it was secured. The owner was in the Dolphin, drinking with his friends.

The Ranger had been slowed down and hampered by the necessity to locate and rescue Buck. Escape from the island had proved harder and more harrowing than expected. Save for Madison Rutledge, who was at his ranch, Hatfield had no local allies. Meanwhile Admiral Luckelew was rapidly strengthening and enlarging his position.

Hatfield moved to the southern end of the street and pulled up his bandanna. The

bony cayuse under him was a mettled, savage beast, ready to shy and buck at the slightest excuse but Hatfield could stick to anything with four legs. If anybody glimpsed him, he believed the enemy would think he was one of the crew which had just gone out.

Hatfield rode straight to the alarm, jumped down and dropped rein. To wield the heavy sledge freely he had to use both hands. He raised it over a brawny shoulder and brought it with all his might against the iron.

The mighty bellow of the fire alarm was more than Hatfield had counted on and he was painfully deafened by the brutal clangor, audible for miles. It was so loud it stunned almost paralyzed his senses. The effect on the skittish cayuse was terrific. Its rein was on the ground but the mustang leaped straight up, whirled and landed running. Hatfield heard a scrabbling, zipping sound and when he looked around his mount had vanished.

He struck the iron another blow, this time not so hard. The first had been enough, however. Everybody had awakened as the metallic voice of the alarm echoed away in the night. "Ought to raise the dead ones," muttered the Ranger.

People began running from their homes. The Eel's outlaws, with no sense of civic duty, pushed outside and stared across the plaza. A townsman in pants, shirt and boots, hastily pulled on when he heard the call, rushed to the Ranger.

"Where's the fire?" he asked.

Others came crowding in, demanding to know what was wrong. Hatfield slouched against one of the thick posts as the gathering grew. The Ranger, looking over the heads of the jostling citizens, saw several of the bandits starting over to find out what was going on. Admiral Luckelew, the Eel and Sharkey Boggs had emerged and stood on the Dolphin porch.

The Ranger's commanding, strong voice spoke up. Since he had overheard the enemy in the saloon he had been repeating those six names to himself. "John Test, Sam Morton, Phil Todd, Ben Corrigan, Art Young, Dave Ince. Are any of you here?"

FIVE had come and each raised a hand, watching the rugged, mud-spattered officer. Hatfield had lowered his mask. He towered there, dominating, impressive.

"You gents are scheduled to die tonight," he said sharply. "A bunch of the Eel's killers will soon ride in to gun you down. Admiral Luckelew and Sharkey Boggs are behind it. Run. Ride to the Double R, Madison Rutledge's ranch, pronto. It's life or death for you."

"Who are you?" asked Test, a lanky Texan with a jutting jaw.

But there was no more time. The Eel's men were in. One had caught some of Hatfield's warning, and he pointed at the Ranger. "You lyin' sidewinder! Say, boys, that's the cuss who run away from the island!"

They reached for their Colts, two up front within a few paces of the officer. The blue steel six-shooter at Hatfield's hip flamed to action, shading the gunhands. An outlaw slug kicked up sand between Hatfield's feet but the Ranger's bullet had flown true. The Eel's crony staggered and sagged against his partner, spoiling the partner's aim. A moment later the partner dropped, badly wounded.

Instantly the crush to get away began. Men lunged in all directions, yelling hoarsely. Pistols were whipped out, and the Eel's followers were shouldered off in the stampede. Hatfield raced south for the shadows, aware of wild lead singing over him. There were figures dashing in the same direction but none bothered him. They were honest folks running for their lives.

The settlement was seized by panic. Women began screaming in the houses, some running out in an attempt to help their husbands. Boggs, the Eel, were ordering their gunslingers to pursue and bring down the Ranger. They were aware of him now, had seen him on the island, and knew he was fighting them.

Hatfield dashed at top speed but the Eel had horses on hand and outlaws jumped to saddle. The Ranger left the lighted plaza behind but the moon was up. Scurrying folks seemed to be everywhere and a few shots banged, vague yells rising. He veered west so the line of buildings would hide him from his foes.

The thundering of hoofs stopped him short. Coming through on the highway, a large knot of masked riders was thundering toward Cypress Town. He instantly concluded they were the contingent

assigned to slay the six Texans.

He raised his arms and boldly trotted straight at them, roaring orders and waving. The leader jerked rein.

"What's up?"

"The Eel says hurry. Get over to the Dolphin pronto. There's been a slip; the town's stirred up. Get goin'."

They could hear the hubbub beyond and the Stetson brim shadowed Hatfield's features in the silver moonglow. The excited bandits surged on, mustangs breaking to pass the tall figure in the road. As a rear straggler started past, Hatfield seized him by the arm and vaulted up behind him.

"Hey, what do you think you're doin'?" The killer tried to turn but the Ranger's forearm whipped around his neck. With a sudden twisting motion, gripping the slowing horse with his knees, Hatfield slung the other rider off and grabbed the rein.

Some of the mounted gunhands from the square met the reinforcements. "Where's that big hombre?" he heard one bellow.

But he had a mount and, bending low over the mustang, he rode west on the road.

"I hope those men I warned have sense enough to run," he murmured, glancing back at Cypress Town, still buzzing with excitement. He was thinking of the half dozen doomed by Luckelew. He had done all he could to save their lives.

As for himself he wished to make the enemy believe he was heading for the Double R. He did not intend to desert Buck but desired to forestall any careful search of the settlement. Horsemen were coming after him and he sent back several shots to draw them along. The animal under him was not comparable to Goldy. He was a bulletheaded roan, stubborn about answering the bit, but Hatfield coaxed enough speed out of him to stay ahead.

A GROVE of pines on the right of the road invited him. He was for a moment out of sight, so he cut into the woods. He pulled up and put a restraining hand on the roan's muzzle to prevent him whinnying as the other horses clopped past, sticking to the highway. Then he slowly worked northward, and soon brought up at the shore of Cypress Bayou.

He was not far from the spot where Admiral Luckelew's barge was moored. He left the roan unsaddled and free, hiding the saddle in the reeds, and afoot sneaked back toward the settlement. It took some dodging to reach the shed where he had left Buck and the man he had snatched from death. Cypress Town was still stirred up, the Eel and his friends searching for their victims.

"That you, Jim?" Buck whispered to him as he opened the little door and slid inside.

"All clear, Buck."

He pushed the door to, catching his wind, listening to the noises from the plaza. It was gloomy in the hut. A few cracks let in slivers of faint light.

A gruff voice from a corner asked, "This the friend you spoke of, Buck?"

Hatfield started, then realized it must be the fellow in black leather. "He's all right, Jim," said Buck. "I didn't have to shoot him."

"So you came to," drawled the Ranger.

"Yes, suh. Buck says you carried me off so the Eel and Boggs couldn't finish me. I'm obliged, mister."

They kept their voices down. Hatfield squatted near the wounded man. "What's your side of it, suh?" he inquired.

"My handle is Tim Drake."

"Of Drake & French I reckon."

"That's it. We're engineers."

"What about Sharkey Boggs and Luckelew?"

Tim Drake cursed hotly. "They're the two worst rascals on the Gulf Coast, mister. George Luckelew's worse, I reckon, for he's the one thinks up their schemes and gives the orders. They enlisted that Eel outlaw, of course."

Under the Ranger's prodding Tim Drake was glad to tell his story. He and his partner, Ned French, made up the engineering firm which had headquarters at Galveston. They specialized in dredging and such work. "You can check up on us, suh, and learn we're honest," went on Drake. "I ain't askin' you to take my word for it."

"I'm willin' to, from what I savvy."

"*Bueno.* You've earned my confidence. French and I borrered a lot of money and bought dredges, barges, and thousands of dollars' worth of equipment. We began to

make a channel in from the Gulf at a point some miles north of here, a channel deep enough to handle the largest ship. It was our idea to build a great seaport. Railroads and commerce would aim for it and the land would leap high in value. We kept it mighty quiet so that honest folks, includin' ourselves, could reap the benefits instead of thievin' speculators hornin' in as they usually do when such news leaks out.

"We'd hardly begun operations when George Luckelew and Sharkey Boggs got wind of our scheme. Luckelew came to us and tried to force his way in but we distrusted him and refused. Next thing we knew the Admiral, as they call Luckelew, struck us hard. He had hired a big crew of gunhands. They stole our steam tug, our barges and a lot of heavy equipment. I was off in Galveston for the day but they wounded Ned French in the attack. We didn't want to blurt it all out and give away our plans. Soon as French recovered, we started huntin' and soon located the cusses here. Tonight we tried to counter but they were too much for us."

"It's mighty interestin'," the Ranger said. "Luckelew not only stole your property, but your idea as well, Mr. Drake. He expects to beat you to it by makin' Cypress Town into a bustlin' port. They're keepin' it on the quiet, just as you did. But they're seizin' land by killin' off the owners."

THEY dared not smoke for the glowing cigarettes would betray them if an enemy happened to be looking at the little shed. Cypress Town still hummed with excitement and Luckelew was hunting for the six men warned off by Hatfield's ruse.

"How many fighters do you reckon Luckelew can muster?" inquired Hatfield.

"Plenty!" replied Drake ruefully. "That's what has us so worried. Luckelew has all his and Boggs' boys besides the Eel's rustlers. That isn't the worst of it, either. This Anguila has a brother named Rafael Palacio who's worse than the Eel himself. He captains a ravenin' pirate band, the scourge of the Gulf. They have their main nest in Mexican territory and prey on small coastal shippin'. Most are Mexicans but some are renegade Texans."

"I've heard tell of 'em," growled Hatfield.

"Well, Rafael would run up to give his brother the Eel a boost. That's all we need to finish us."

"Was your partner Ned French in that attack earlier tonight?"

"Yeah, but I hope he got clear, he was off on the other side of town. My horse was hit and I recall tryin' to ride around the store. Then things went black till I woke up with Buck coverin' me. Smart lad, your friend Buck, suh. We talked things over some before you returned."

"French will be worried about you, won't he?"

"Sure, he will. I'm afeared he may do somethin' foolhardy when he finds I didn't get clear. He'll allow time for me to meet him at the rendezvous."

"Where's that?"

"At a crossroad five miles north on the coastal highway."

Hatfield thought it over. Ideas were shaping in his clever mind. He was adding up the ranching allies he might gather in a supreme effort to counter Admiral Luckelew.

[*Turn page*]

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Yet the Admiral's strength was growing too. Honest men were being shot up at the orders of the chief as Luckelew fought to win.

"I better tell you who I am, Mr. Drake. My handle is Jim Hatfield and I'm a Texas Ranger, sent from Austin to look into complaints down this way."

"I figured you must be a law officer. I'm mighty happy you've come, Ranger Hatfield. You can depend on us to cooperate fully."

"How do you feel? Could you ride for it if I fetch you a saddled horse?"

"I believe so. I need to warn French before he sticks his head into this trap huntin' me."

Drake's flesh wound were bound up as well as possible under the circumstances. Hatfield gave Drake cartridge belts and guns, and the engineer tried out his legs. "Yeah, they'll hold me up, Ranger."

Hatfield told Drake what he desired. "I'll be ready," promised the engineer.

It took nearly an hour for the officer to steal a saddled animal. The Eel's men were buzzing around like hornets. He tethered the horse outside town, toward the lagoon, then went back to lead Drake to the spot. Finally Drake said *adios*, and rode away.

Back in the shed Hatfield and Buck lay listening to the coming and going of mustangs, the voices of their enemies.

Midnight had long since come and gone. Catnapping, jumping alert at nearby noises, Hatfield saw through the wall cracks the faint grayness heralding the dawn. A wet sea breeze blew in, rattling loose boards, soughing around corners.

The Admiral held Cypress Town and the aces in this game of death. Hatfield might have fled the settlement during the night, as he had helped Tim Drake to do, yet he was playing a perilous part, taking desperate chances to remain close to the foe. He intended watching the Admiral's moves as long as possible.

In the little shack Buck and the Ranger waited as the day took hold and the sun came up. Armed to the teeth, they would sell their lives dearly if discovered.

Hatfield heard voices and footsteps, went to peek from a spyhole toward the Dolphin. A couple of the toughs, men he had fought against on the island and in town, came slowly along the lane, chatting together. One carried a carbine, the second a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun. They were plainly on patrol.

"Wonder if there's anything in that old shed?" said the nearer man. He stopped and stared at the weather-beaten structure. Then he took a step toward the shack.

The Ranger gripped his six-shooter, crouching by the narrow, sagging door.

CHAPTER IX

New Hand

BRANCH WATKINS sat a black gelding with an RR brand, watching the road from Cypress Town. It was early morning and a salty wind blew in his face, coming from the Gulf.

Watkins was on guard, helping Madison Rutledge hold off vicious attackers who were seeking to destroy the rancher. The young New Englander had changed a great deal since his escape from the whaler. He had thrown away the tattered raiment in which he had swum ashore. The cowboys at the RR had given him whatever they had to spare, one handing over a blue flannel shirt, another a pair of riding breeches reinforced with leather.

Rutledge had supplied high-heeled spurred black boots and a Stetson with a curved brim. From the ranch arsenal Watkins had obtained a studded cartridge belt and Frontier Model Colt .45 revolver of which he was inordinately proud. Around his bronzed, strong neck was a silk bandanna which he especially prized since it was a gift from Miss Lou Rutledge.

Hearty meals and rest at the Double R had filled out his face. He was not a handsome man but had a kindly, open look which attracted people. His brown eyes were clear, decent.

Life at Rutledge's suited him. He had never felt so content, in spite of the menace hanging over them. Watkins had a deep, inborn love of animals. Rutledge specialized in horses and this was just what Branch preferred. He had fitted in immediately. With his curly chestnut hair trimmed by a comrade in the bunkhouse,

and in clean clothing, Watkins was a new man.

He could ride well though he was not yet equal to some of the wilder specimens of horseflesh which trained cowboys could handle. Yet he had a way with all living things and Rutledge had at once noted this.

"You've a knack with critters, Branch," the rancher told him. It had encouraged Watkins and made him feel wanted. He tried all the harder to please and assist. Memories of Connecticut and the beatings received on the hellship were rapidly fading away as he seized hold on this exciting life.

His willingness to cut loose from the past was stimulated by the presence of Lou Rutledge. He thought of her more and more and could picture her clearly in her neat brown riding skirt and white blouse tied at the throat with a ribbon. Her violet eyes enthralled him. The thick yellow hair framing her lovely face fascinated Watkins. All the boys were smitten by her beauty and Watkins was no exception. But he dared not hope. He felt he was unimportant. He had no money and no prospects. Modest and unassuming, Watkins sought to hide his growing adoration for Miss Lou.

The sun was up and it promised to be a hot day. The breeze did not help for it was heavily laden with sticky moisture which accentuated the warmth. Watkins had come on duty an hour ago, after breakfast, relieving "Eggy," a Double R waddy. He had his loaded pistol and, besides, carried a carbine. He stayed back off the road and this was but one of the posts Rutledge had set up to forestall attacks.

Branch stroked the silken mane of the black and scratched behind the animal's ears, murmuring to him in a soft, affectionate way which pleased and surprised the mustang who was hardly used to such attentions.

The horse shivered and alerted, sniffing. "What is it, Prince?" asked Branch.

Prince was trying to tell him somebody was coming. And soon Watkins glimpsed a man walking toward him. From his saddle, Branch could see the stranger through a natural vista in the pine. Branch brought his carbine to the ready.

The fellow trudged along, glancing back as though fearful of pursuit. He wore a sweated white shirt, old trousers, runover boots. He was hatless and dirt streaked his face. His dark hair was graying at the temples, his shoulders drooped wearily. He did not look dangerous but the handle of a six-gun protruded from his belt.

He seemed to be alone. Branch Watkins let him get abreast of him and then he leveled the carbine. The cluck-cluck of the cocking rifle was warning enough but Watkins said sharply, "Throw up your hands!"

THE man jumped but obeyed, glancing toward his captor, a hopeless look coming into his eyes.

"You got me, son," he admitted. "Don't shoot."

"I ain't goin' to if you behave," replied Watkins coolly. "Who are you and where you bound?"

"Say, you don't sound like an outlaw," countered the other. He seemed to take heart.

"I ain't. Are you?"

"No." He hesitated, then decided to speak frankly. "I was lookin' for the Double R, to tell you the truth. My handle is Sam Morton." He watched Branch to see if that meant anything.

It didn't. Watkins had never heard of him. "Are you alone?"

"Yeah, that is, I believe so, but there may be some of the others along soon."

"What others?"

Watkins' appearance and manner had convinced Morton. "Maybe yuh're one of Rutledge's boys, young feller. If so, I'm a good friend of his. Take me to him, will you? Give me a chance."

"I might. But you'll have to give up your gun."

"I'm willin'."

Branch kept him covered. He gave several shrill whistles. After a wait, Willie Broadhurst, a Double R puncher, came riding up. "Howdy, Morton," Broadhurst said to the visitor. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"He wants to see the boss," said Watkins. "I didn't know him, Willie."

"He's all right," nodded Broadhurst. "Hop up behind me, Mr. Morton, and I'll take you in."

"Phew!" exclaimed Sam Morton wiping his brow with a sleeve. "I'm mighty glad to be here, gents. I been runnin', dodgin'

and hidin' for hours. Passel of killers are on my trail. Look here, young feller. Like I said there may be more along like me. I'll give yuh their handles so you'll know 'em. There's John Test, Phil Todd, Art Young and Dave Ince. Ben Corrigan's gone to Houston for a few days, but he was one of the six who got warned last night."

"Who's after you?" asked Broadhurst. "The Eel?"

"That's what the big galoot in Cypress Town told us. Mentioned Admiral Luckelew and Sharkey Boggs too."

"Those are the rascals who are tryin' to wipe us out, too," cried Watkins.

"Well, we were lucky, I reckon. I was sound asleep when the fire alarm rung. Pulled on my pants and boots and run out, expectin' a blaze. Instead, this hombre was waitin' and yelled a warnin' for us to head here."

"Who was this friend who gave you the word?" inquired Branch.

"Never saw him before but he had a mighty salty look. Stood head and shoulders over us. Had black hair and a commandin' way. He appeared to savvy a lot."

"Jim Hatfield—that's him!" said Watkins. "He saved you, sir. What happened after he told you to run?"

"There was bedlam busted loose. Gunhands begun shootin'. We scattered every which way and I aimed for here. But I'm afraid this Hatfield has been killed. As I was gallopin' off, a passel of masked riders run right over him and that's the last I saw of the tall hombre."

"That's bad news," declared Watkins. Madison Rutledge had let him understand how much he was counting on the powerful visitor. Branch had told his story to the caller, and Rutledge had been most friendly toward Hatfield.

Morton was anxious about his family but it was unlikely that even such ruffians as the Admiral commanded would harm women and children.

Sam Morton rode off behind Broadhurst toward the ranch and Watkins resumed his watch. Soon Madison Rutledge came to join him. "Morton says there may be more of my friends along," said the boss. The rancher wore a fresh shirt and brown pants tucked into spurred halfboots. A fawn colored Stetson was canted on his yellowish hair. There was a grim light in his keen, deepset blue eyes, and his bearded jaw was set. "I hope what Sam claims about Hatfield isn't so, Branch. If true, we're out of luck, it's a body blow. I'll tell you a secret. Hatfield is a Texas Ranger, the best of the lot, and they're all fine fellers. He rode all the way from Austin to give us a boost."

"Yes, sir." Watkins did not know much of the Rangers. He had only heard of the state officers a few times and had had no experience with them. But he had liked and admired Jim Hatfield.

RUTLEDGE rolled a quirly and passed the makings to Branch. The rancher had come to watch for the other fugitives from Cypress Town. "I'll sure have to change the signals if Hatfield's been killed or captured like Morton says. Can't wait forever. The Admiral's gettin' stronger. Boggs and the Eel have plenty of fighters. If we ever hope to beat the cusses, I'll have to collect what men I can and strike."

Soon a limping man appeared on the road. "There's Jack Test," said Rutledge, spurring out to meet his friend.

Test was slimmer and younger than Morton, with a grave face and dark, worried eyes. He had only a pair of worn carpet slippers on his blistered feet. He too had dashed forth at the fire alarm and had fled from violent death after the Ranger's warning. And Test, as well as Morton, had had a glimpse of his tall savior when Hatfield had been enfolded in a crush of mounted, marked killers.

"Take Jack over, see he's fed and given whatever he wants," ordered Rutledge. "And fetch back a couple of horses."

"Yes, sir." It was not far and Watkins rode double on Prince with Test. He walked to the kitchen with the lame guest. Miss Lou was in there, pretty as a picture in a red apron over a gingham dress. A ribbon bound her thick yellow hair. She smiled at Branch, shook hands with John Test and sat him down with Morton, who was at the table stowing away food and hot coffee.

Watkins saddled two more mustangs and led them behind Prince, back to Rutledge who was talking with the third and fourth of those who had fled Cypress Town. Art Young and David Ince were old friends of Rutledge's. Young was

heavy and short, with a thick brown mustache, while Ince had a reddish complexion and hair to match.

"Yeah, Corrigan was out of town. They shot down Todd." Young told of Phil Todd's death, how he had been filled with lead as he stopped at his home despite the warning. Gunhands had roared up and Art Young had seen them kill Todd.

Neither Young nor Ince had observed the tall man as he bumped into the masked horsemen for they had run in a different direction from Morton and Test.

Rutledge returned to the house with his friends, leaving Watkins on guard. nothing occurred and at noon Broadhurst came out to relieve Branch.

Watkins unsaddled Prince in the side yard, talking soothingly to him all the while. Prince nuzzled his shoulder. Branch groomed him carefully, watered him and turned him into one of the corrals. Rutledge's ranch was equipped for horses. He had long stables with separate stalls for thoroughbreds, and fenced pastures. On the open range roamed Double R cattle but with Rutledge the horses came first.

BRANCH went into the kitchen to get some supper. Lou had her hands full, cooking for so many men. But she was trained to it and she was good-natured, always ready for a jest with the boys. She was busy getting the meal ready and her father sat at the table, talking things over with his friends from Cypress.

"I think we ought to hit town and take over, Rutledge," insisted Test. "If you can spare the men, it's the only thing to do. Our women and kids are there and there's no sense waitin'. From what you say, this Admiral cuss and Sharkey Boggs are growin' stronger every minute."

"That's true," agreed Rutledge. "I'd start now if I knew for sure about Hatfield. I tell you I promised him I'd lie low here till I heard from him. I got a special reason for not goin' against his wishes."

"What's that?" asked Art Young.

Rutledge hesitated. Then he said, "No sense keepin' it from you. This Hatfield is a Texas Ranger, come to give me a helpin' hand. I can't go against him. Suppose I wreck his work by hornin' in at the wrong moment? He risked his neck to save us and he'd do the same again."

"He risked it once too often, Rutledge," said Sam Morton grimly. "I tell you he's dead."

"Either that or a prisoner," nodded Test.

"I wish I knew for certain," repeated Rutledge, shaking his head. "Might be a chance of helpin' him if he's a captive. We could be slaughtered by that bunch of gunhands, gents. I been hopin' the Ranger could muster more fighters."

"If he's dead there's no sense foolin' here any longer," argued Morton. "A corpse can't marshal an army."

Branch Watkins listened to the talk. He could see that his employer was in an agony of indecision about what to do. Inwardly, the new hand agreed with his boss. He believed that the tall Hatfield was their main chance. Nobody realized better than did Watkins the crushing, evil strength of the Admiral and Sharkey Boggs.

An idea occurred to him and he spoke up. "Boss, let me go into Cypress Town and see can I locate Ranger Hatfield. I can sneak in after dark, on foot. If he's still around, I'll find him."

They all stared at him. Watkins was aware that Miss Lou had stopped her work and he glanced at her. Her violet eyes appealed to him, filled with a woman's anxiety. Suddenly Branch realized that she was terribly worried because of his offer to spy on the enemy. Somehow it overjoyed him even though he regretted seeing her unhappy. It meant she felt personally concerned over his fate. Wild hope sprang in him.

"If they catch you they'll tear you to shreds, Branch," objected Rutledge. "They're after you on account of your escape from the island and I believe they know you warned me that night. Some of 'em saw you ridin' with me."

"You shouldn't sacrifice any men, father," said Miss Lou crossly. "We can't spare them now."

Rutledge blinked, surprised at his daughter's sharp remark.

Branch Watkins was determined to make the attempt. Not only did he desire to help his boss but now he had found a way to draw the young woman's interest. "I'll go it alone, sir. So it won't be much loss if they take me. I'm willin' to do it." He could not help looking a bit noble as he watched the effect on Miss Lou from the corner of his eye.

Impatiently she turned back to the stove and banged a frying pan on the lid, which jumped, as did the cowmen.

"Just how do you aim to go about it?" asked Rutledge.

"I'll ride through on Prince, sir. I'll hide him in the woods near the bayou shore a half mile west of Cypress Town, streak my face and hands with mud and check up on the settlement. All I need is a pair of moccasins, a knife and pistol. I can find Ranger Hatfield if he's still alive and then you'll know what must be done."

"He's got the right idea, Madison," said Sam Morton. "I'm for lettin' him make a stab at it. After all, what have we got to lose?"

"Branch's life, that's all." Miss Lou sniffed.

THEY were interrupted as an alarm was shouted in from the ring of sentinels the Double R kept out day and night to forestall a surprise attack. Rutledge hurried to the yard, followed by his guests but Watkins lingered in the kitchen as the girl turned her back on him, apparently very busy with her household tasks.

"I'm mighty sorry you don't agree, Miss Lou. I'd hate to do anything you wouldn't like."

She glanced at him. Then she shook her head and hurried from the room. The puzzled Watkins went out to join the group in the yard. Several cowboys, looking very much the worse for wear, had been passed through and were talking with Rutledge.

Rutledge looked glum as he heard their story. Watkins soon learned they were Circle 4 riders. Vern Lynn, owner of this spread, had been a neighbor of Rutledge's, owning part of the range north of Cypress Bayou. The cowboys said that Lynn had been shot down, by the Eel and a band of his killers, reinforced by Sharkey Boggs.

The Eel had stolen cattle and run the beeves after dark to a landing on the north shore of the bayou. There had been a fight, reported the cowhands. Lynn had gone down and others had been wounded. Beaten off, the Circle 4 had bound their wounds and checked up. Later, after the outlaws had gone, they had returned to hunt for Lynn. But they believed the rancher's body had been tossed into the lagoon. They had wasted a lot of time searching for their boss, then had gone into camp to sleep. And after returning to their home ranch to report the sad tidings to Lynn's wife, they had decided to come to Rutledge. "Mrs. Lynn is most here with the three kids, suh," the *segundo*. "We rode ahead to tell you."

"I was countin' on poor Vern," muttered Rutledge.

Watkins touched his employer's arm. "Look, Boss. I'll eat and sleep now. Then I'll start out late in the afternoon and time it so I hit the bayou after dark."

"Let him go," said Morton. He was worried about his family and so were the others. "If he don't, I will."

"I can make it," promised Watkins.

"All right," agreed Rutledge.

"See if you can find out anything about our folks, Watkins," begged Test. "If they're in danger I'll hustle home pronto."

The other felt the same way. Tension had grown almost unbearable and a gloomy pall hung over the Double R. They could not doubt the Admiral's terrible strength.

Late that afternoon, the sun reddening behind him, Branch Watkins took the highway eastward for the Gulf and Cypress Town. He was on a dangerous mission yet he was light of heart and glad to be of service. Lou Rutledge had said good-by to him in such a way that he was certain of her deep regard.

CHAPTER X

Gunfight

WARILY Branch Watkins stole along the winding trail on the south shore of Cypress Bayou. The track curved inland at times to avoid swampy reaches, skirting the muddy spots. The moonlight gleamed on the oily water and there was a soft slap-slap as the tide moved it slowly seaward.

He had smeared his face and hands with bayou mud to kill the sheen of flesh. In his belt were thrust his Colt and long knife, on his feet were supple moccasins which were much quieter and easier to walk in than heavy riding boots. In the woods to his rear Prince waited, muzzled

to prevent him from neighing. And a lighted craft which had drawn the spying Watkins, moored up the bayou, had proved to be Admiral Luckelew's handsomely outfitted barge. Branch had seen it at the island and had immediately recognized it when he had crept through the reeds for a peek. He had glimpsed the Admiral and some of his guards although Boggs and the Eel were not visible.

The skyglow of the settlement hung in the dank air ahead. A couple of horsemen, from town, trotted their mustangs uptrail and Watkins drew off to hide till they had passed.

Patches of growth along the root-tangled bayou were dense as jungle. Spanish moss hung on live oaks, tangled vines swayed from the trees. Great cypresses towered, toes in the swamps, casting their black shadows. Mud and mosquitoes, alligators, abounded around the bayous.

Watkins stole by several deserted huts, a broken-down, ramshackle wagon near them. Creole fishermen had once lived here but they were gone.

The breeze was off the Gulf and brought the scent of frying fish and other odors. Fish was a staple article of diet on the coast. Branch moved as close in as he dared. New lanterns had been strung in the center and he noted a number of armed outlaws, some of whom he recognized as the Eel's followers. They were obviously on guard, patrolling the streets.

To this point he had had every confidence that he would be able to discover Ranger Jim Hatfield. Cypress Town was small and he had believed he would eventually see the tall man. He began slowly circling, keeping low to the ground and well out of the light. Down at the south end he could look up broad Ocean Avenue. The Dolphin was running wide open, and loaded with his enemies, Palacio's and Boggs' gunfighters. "Ain't goin' to be as easy as I thought," he decided, when he had been lurking around for an hour with no sign of Hatfield.

Porfirio Palacio, Anguila, the Eel, was easily distinguishable even at a distance. Snaky in movement, his figure could be picked out in a crowd. Watkins heard the low beat of the steam tug's engine. It stopped at the wharf and soon Branch sighted the commodore. The Eel came out of the Dolphin to greet Boggs and the two went inside together.

Watkins was determined to make a success of his mission. But if Hatfield had been slain there was no hope of seeing the tall officer. "I better ask somebody," he decided. Another hour slipped away and Branch was getting impatient.

Lights showed in homes and so far as he could tell the families of the townsmen had not been harmed.

To make inquiries at the saloons was out of the question for they were held by the enemy. Watkins had never heard of any law official in Cypress Town. The sleepy little place had never before needed a constable or marshal. Then he remembered the general store. The elderly proprietor was a decent fellow, Watkins had chatted with him when he had bought provisions there. He worked around to the east side, crawling most of the way, flattening out to check up and get his breath.

A lamp burned in the rear living quarters of the store. There the owner lived with his family.

AWARE that Boggs and the Eel would be delighted to catch him and kill him, that the settlement swarmed with their agents, Branch Watkins inched toward the back entry. He reached the low stoop. A shaft of light from a window bathed in radiance but he had to take a chance. He rapped sharply on a panel of the door.

There was a silence from inside. After a time a man's voice demanded, "Who's that?"

"My name is Watkins sir. I'm a customer of yours." Branch was urgent, perhaps too eager. He did not take into account the alarming effect the presence of the bloodthirsty bandits must have upon elderly, peace-loving folks. "Please let me in. I only want to ask you some questions. If the outlaws catch me, they'll kill me."

The storekeeper did not unbolt the door. "You go away," he ordered. "We ain't takin' sides and we ain't huntin' any trouble. But I got a shotgun and I'll fight if I have to." He was suspicious, thinking this was a ruse to gain a way in. He raised his voice, almost shouting. "Go on, leave!" Expecting a fuss he was nervous over it. "We're turnin' in."

"Keep your voice down," begged Watkins, standing close to the oaken door. He decided to make the best of a bad job and try to learn whatever he might from outside. "Tell me this. Have you heard or seen anything of a tall man with black hair, rugged lookin' and quick with a gun? The outlaws have been after his hide."

Another short silence greeted this. "Why don't you go away?" said the storekeeper finally, voice shrilling.

A brushing sound at the rear corner of the building caused Watkins to whirl. He saw the dark figure in a Stetson and leather, chinstrap taut under the bearded jaw. Branch was in the ray from the window and showed much more clearly.

"Who is it, Dinny?" asked a second, slipping around to join his mate.

"So help me if it ain't that sailor who run away from the island!" roared Dinny. "Reach, you polecat!"

Dinny leveled his carbine and pulled trigger. Only Branch's spasmodic, frantic dive head first off the porch saved him. The bullet shrieked within inches of his head. He landed hard, scrabbling around the turn. Dinny's bandit partner jumped into it, firing a sawed-off shotgun.

Watkins heard spreading buckshot plunking into the sandy earth or rapping the wooden wall. The storekeeper and his wife were yelling for help.

Ahead was the lighted main way and armed sentries were dashing toward the center of the fracas, guided by the booming explosions and excited calls of Dinny and his companion. Watkins sent a quick shot past the corner which made Dinny jump back. But he was caught in that narrow lane. If he rushed on he would run into the arms of a crowd. If he doubled back and sought to cross the back road, Dinny and the shotgunner would riddle him.

Watkins, desperate to escape, saw the invitingly dark spaces under the store, which rested on piles driven into the sand. He ducked and squeezed underneath, and threw himself along in froglike lunges. He bumped his head on a floor stud but kept going and in a few shoves reached the north side of the building. A glance told him he had gained a second or two, for none of them showed close at hand. He hopped out, rose to his feet and ran for it.

He had taken but a few steps when he saw horsemen coming straight at him, cutting him off from the bayou shore, which he had hoped to make. He veered east and Dinny heard him as he crossed the lane between the stoops and stables. Dinny had just rounded the corner on Branch's trail. But the two killers whirled, carbine and scattergun again trying for the fugitive. Branch made it, putting the storage barn between himself and his immediate enemies.

HIS breath rasped in deep gasps. Pelting along, he believed he might make that black wall of brush toward the Gulf. But the riders had him in sight and were spurring in, shooting, cutting him off. They would get there before he could and have him in the clear. He was headed south like a runway longhorn.

He kept in near the stables, barns and shacks servicing the buildings on the east side of Ocean Avenue. The Dolphin was not far below.

"There he goes!" They were hot on the trail, whooping it up, boring in from all angles. Orders were called and lanterns brought into play. Outlaws cut through aisles, and Watkins had run but fifty yards south when he saw it was hopeless.

The riders were galloping down on him. Bunches of the Eel's rustlers blocked the ways. The Dolphin was brightly lighted and close to its northeast corner stood a small stable. The door was invitingly open. Watkins realized that once inside he would be trapped with no hope of getting clear. But the lead was flying all about him and he wanted to stave off as long as possible that final moment which all men dread.

He swung to his right. A barn hid him from the oncoming horsemen as he entered the lane. He faced toward Ocean Avenue and the Dolphin, with a couple of armed bandits crossing the street back of the big saloon.

The dark recesses of the stable would hide and protect him. He could shoot it out with the foe while his ammunition lasted, or until they smoked him out and a blind chunk of lead ended the brutal game. It became just a matter of time.

"She was right," he muttered.

Though impelled by a natural self-preservation, all sorts of images and

thoughts raced through Watkins' mind. Intuition or maybe just plain common sense had told the girl that he would be sticking his head in a noose by entering Cypress Town. Lately, life had taken on new fascination, a glorious future opening out before Branch, because of the young woman. High hopes had been his. That was over.

He remembered, too, the rocky New England farm where he had been born and brought up. And other things hardly pertinent to the desperate situation he was in.

The outlaws in the alley behind the Dolphin spied him, raised their guns. The powder flamed from their Colt muzzles and he heard the ominous zing of lead splintering the door at his side.

CHAPTER XI

Message of Death

VOLLEYS of gunfire, the shouting and general excitement caused Ranger Jim Hatfield and his young friend, Buck Robertson, to flatten themselves on the black tarpaper roof of the livery stable next to the Dolphin.

They were near the rear, under them stalls in which were kept riding horses and hacks for hire. A youthful Mexican night wrangler was on duty in the tiny front office and the two spies on the flat roof were in little danger of being heard by him.

"What in tarnation blazes is that!" whispered the Ranger, craning his neck.

Buck had squirmed around, too, trying to see what went on. Down in a private dining room on that side of the roomy Dolphin, Admiral Luckelew, the Eel and Commodore Sharkey Boggs had been eating, drinking and making plans. Through an open window, Hatfield had managed to catch some of what they had said, and what he had overheard had scarcely proved pleasant.

As long as they stayed quiet on the roof the two were comfortable enough but when they wormed from place to place, small pebbles embedded in the pitch bruised their hands and flesh. Hatfield had doggedly stuck in Cypress Town, in a daring and so far successful attempt to watch the Admiral and learn what came next with the powerful enemy. He had kept Buck near him, wishing to allow the youth as much time as possible to regain strength after his ordeals. And he had believed he could use his comrade as a messenger when the moment arrived.

That deserted shack so close to the center of things had proved a safe haven. The Eel hardly suspected the Ranger would be so near to the heart of it all. A couple of sentries had approached and one had even looked inside but had not entered for a thorough search of the dark interior, contenting himself with glancing through the doorway. Hatfield then was crouching behind the door. Buck had frozen under his blanket on the other side, and the gunhand had turned and gone on his tour. Such fellows were apt to be as careless as they were cruel and, except against weaker victims, did not make good soldiers.

As Hatfield and Buck Robertson watched from the back edge of the roof, they soon discovered what all the fuss was about. The first shots and yelps had come from near the general store, toward the bayou dock. The Admiral, Boggs and the Eel, hearing the hubbub, had left their table and drinks, hurrying for the back door of the Dolphin. From the main saloon and from all over the settlement, armed killers surged toward the spot.

"Buck, there's Branch Watkins!" Hatfield said in his young friend's ear.

"It's him, sure enough! They're after him."

Watkins had swung into view, coming along the lighted aisle between a small stable and the larger edifice used by the Dolphin as a barn and storehouse. This lane was almost in a direct line with the Ranger's position on the livery stable roof.

"Buck! Hustle to the front, drop down and get our horses. Hold 'em at the bayou dock till I come." Hatfield had to think fast. Their enemies would be drawn to the alley and Buck would have a good chance of making it the other way.

"See you," whispered the lean youth, crawling off. He had learned obedience to orders and hurried to carry them out.

Hatfield drew a six-shooter as he

rapidly estimated the desperate situation. From his height he could see the converging parties of the enemy, riders coming down the line, running gunhands in the lanes and byways. Below him, facing away from him, were two with raised weapons who threatened to cut down Watkins.

It was vital to drive them off and the officer's heavy revolver boomed. Winged, one of the pair screeched and dropped his right arm, along with his gun. He grabbed at his punctured shoulder and turning, rushed away. The Ranger's next bullet cut a groove in the second man's ear, wrecked his aim at Watkins, and sent him after his partner.

"This way, Watkins!" The stentorian voice of the Ranger rose over the growing din.

ON HIS right he saw Anguila, the Eel, dart from the back door at the Dolphin, Colt in hand. Behind Palacio showed Sharkey Boggs, and then the massive, bearded Admiral himself. A quick shot dropped the Eel, while Boggs and Luckelew recoiled, hunting cover. A moment after he went down, Palacio jumped up and leaped back through the entry.

"Watkins! Here! It's Hatfield."

Branch had been on the point of entering the stable's side door. But he heard his friend calling and trotted toward him. He looked up and saw the silhouette of the officer's head and shoulders framed against the lighted sky.

To the left, a knot of killers swarmed down the line, and the Ranger's Colts barked, driving them back into the aisle through which they had come. Then Branch Watkins jumped across the narrow back street. Hatfield leaned far over and grasped his outstretched hand, in a mighty jerk aided by Branch's pushoff, yanking him to the roof.

"Come on. No time to fool around, Watkins."

Hatfield led the way, running to the front. As he had figured, everybody who might be a menace to them had headed for the rear. They had a few breaths in which to try for it. At the hitchrails were plenty of saddled mustangs.

Without hesitation the Ranger dropped to the continuous slanting wooden sunawning extending above the sidewalk and front verandas. Watkins, unable to believe his luck, was right behind him, his breath burning in lungs tortured by exertion and excitement.

"Stay with me!" warned Hatfield.

Just beneath them were plenty of mounts. Hatfield dropped the few feet into the leather seat of a black, and his long legs vised on the startled creature's barrel ribs. The mustang bucked and fought but the man leaned out, snatched the rein off the railing and swung into Ocean Avenue.

Branch Watkins followed suit. He dared not miss. He was not the rider that Hatfield was, however, and clawed at the horn and whatever was handy as he landed, jolted by the bump. Yet he held tight as the brown horse objected to this unusual method of mounting. Branch somehow managed to catch hold of the rein and as he lifted it the mustang whirled and bolted.

Watkins was nearly thrown off and had to hold on for dear life. The brown cayuse had gone crazy for a few moments and no pull on the leather strap could stop him as he took the bit in his teeth and went to it. The Ranger already had his horse in perfect control and was starting north toward the bayou.

Alarmed yells, gunshots, came from the vicinity of the Dolphin. The enemy realized they were getting clear.

Hatfield glanced back, saw Watkins was in trouble. He pulled the black around, and swirled back to give Branch a hand, as the stubborn beast gave an exhibition of a bronco trying to unseat a not too skilled rider. Time was running out. They were in the brightly lighted street. In a jiffy the Admiral would have fifty guns on them.

Hatfield reached out and caught the other rein. The sharp pull of the other horse straightened out the bucker and Watkins breathed with the deepest relief as the motion grew easier. Picking up to a gallop, the Ranger flew toward the pier.

The steam tug lay at the dock, awaiting Boggs. Only a skeleton crew was aboard, however. Seeing the Ranger and Watkins, they shouted and tried for them but the two were moving fast, and Hatfield veered up the bayou trail.

"Jim! Here I am." Buck Robertson came from under a giant oak tree near the path.

He was on Old Heart Seven, his chunky gray, and was leading Goldy.

Pursuit was starting and the men on the tug were howling as the Eel and his killers mounted and spurred after the running trio. Hatfield transferred to Goldy's saddle without touching dirt.

"Keep ahead, Watkins. We'll cover you."

BUCK was next in line, with the Ranger lying back to discourage the infuriated outlaws.

They stuck to the beaten track for a time. Hatfield sang out, "How about makin' for the Double R, Watkins?"

"That's where I'm goin'," replied Branch.

In the moonlight the sluggish bayou gleamed ominously. Woods and swampy areas were on either hand, with towering cypresses and other growth thrusting to the sky. Now and then a bullet zipped in the leaves, hunting them as Anguila roared on their trail.

They stayed ahead. Up the bayou a piece, Branch Watkins turned south into the forest. Soon they reached a glade where Prince stood tethered. Watkins jumped from the bucker, which had fought itself into a lather. He was glad to mount his own horse.

Hatfield had pulled up close, and behind them the Eel and his men were snaking through the trees.

"You know the shortest way home?" demanded the Ranger.

"Yes, I came through here on my way in," answered Watkins.

He followed his back trail and fighting a hide-and-seek action through the woods and fields, they finally came to the highway. It was easier going on this and the trio made the best possible speed toward the Double R.

Dawn was at hand as they loped the tired horses the last miles to Rutledge's. Some of the Eel's bunch had stuck to it, and were not far behind, shooting at them on the straightaways. In the grayness, Branch Watkins, aware of the sentry post on the road, sang out.

Willie Broadhurst emerged from the pine grove and waved an arm at them, for he recognized Watkins and Hatfield.

"We're home, Willie," cried Branch gladly.

"Boy, I'm sure happy you made it. Who's that on your trail?" Broadhurst pointed at the turn, around which the advance of the enemy riders were nosing.

"Had a close call—tell you later," said Watkins. "Those are the Eel's boys, Willie."

"Huh!" Broadhurst threw the carbine to his shoulder and squeezed trigger. The whining bullets sent the fagged pursuers scattering to either side of the road and desultory replies snapped in the tall pines.

The firing soon brought reinforcements, and seeing these, Anguila's followers turned tail and ran back for Cypress Town.

At the Double R, bathed in the fresh morning light, the battered three were made welcome. Madison Rutledge, John Test, Sam Morton and the others gathered around the Ranger, Buck and Watkins, congratulating them, shaking hands.

"So you found 'em and fetched 'em out!" cried Rutledge, slapping Branch on the back.

Watkins grinned at Hatfield. "You might stretch it to that if you weren't particular about what's what."

"He did fine, Mr. Rutledge," the Ranger said.

"I made 'em use up a lot of lead, at that," said Watkins. He gave a quick account of how he had nearly been killed in town, how the Ranger had saved him and run him away. Watkins was covered with bruises and cuts. Three enemy slugs had nipped his flesh, yet so intent had he been on escape that he had not noticed his injuries until he was out of danger.

Branch glanced around. Outside the kitchen door, arms akimbo, stood Miss Lou Rutledge. She was staring at him and Watkins limped toward her. Hatfield watched. The girl began talking as Watkins joined her. It looked as though she were scolding him but he could tell she was greatly relieved to see him.

HATFIELD and Watkins had first had to reassure the townsmen as to their families. So far the Admiral had made no move against the women and children of the landholders he sought to destroy.

"I'm glad you made it here," cried Madison Rutledge. He sensed the worth of this powerful ally. And at sight of the rugged Hatfield the others felt fresh hope springing in their hearts. "I took the lib-

erty of tellin' them you're a Ranger. Hope that's all right."

Hatfield nodded. "Saved me the trouble. I've got the targets lined up in my sights." From the secret pocket in his shirt he brought forth the silver star on silver circle, proud emblem of the Rangers. This he pinned on, the sun glinting on the metal.

"We sort of bumped into each other in town, Ranger," drawled Sam Morton. "You saved our hides."

"Morton and Test were sure you were dead or captured," said Rutledge. "I was of two minds, so I sent in Watkins."

"Last time we saw you," Morton put in, "you were swept up by a mob of masked riders, Ranger."

"I managed to squirm loose," said Hatfield.

"You must be plumb tuckered out. Come in and let my daughter give you grub. Then you must sleep."

As Hatfield came to the open kitchen door he heard the young woman's voice. It was severe as she scolded Branch Watkins. "I told you not to go in there. You nearly didn't get back. Then what would I have done?"

"I'm sorry," replied Watkins meekly. "Somebody had to go."

"Yes, but it didn't have to be you! I didn't close my eyes all night worrying. As soon as you've eaten you get right off to bed." Lou Rutledge held her sweetheart personally responsible for the anguish she had undergone. From her point of view he did not need to make a special hero of himself at the risk of his life.

Hatfield ducked through the door. Watkins had just sat down to a hearty meal and Miss Lou was standing by the stove, a skillet in one hand as she laid down the law. "He'll stop and go when she tells him to," thought the amused officer. But Watkins looked very contented and pleased for now Branch was sure of her affection. She had kissed him when she had washed and bandaged his wounds.

"How about grub, sister?" sang out Rutledge. "Hungry men here." Buck Robertson and the Ranger took places at the table and Lou Rutledge quickly served them a plate and steaming cups of coffee sweetened with molasses.

Rutledge, Morton and Test smoked as the three hungry, weary men stoked up.

"What did you learn, Ranger?" inquired the rancher chief, when Hatfield had finished his food and was rolling a quirly. "We got any chance of beatin' those cusses?"

The Ranger looked down at his cigarette as he held a flaring match to it and drew in a puff. His gravity had its effect on them, for they realized the situation was very serious. "Rafael Palacio, the Eel's brother, will pull in at the island around dawn tomorrow, gents. He'll have a mighty savage and real big bunch of pirates with him to give the Admiral a hand."

A silence fell, the men around the table consulting one another with their eyes. They could imagine the brutal raid such ruthless killers would make.

CHAPTER XII

Plans

AT THE risk of his life Jim Hatfield had hidden out in Cypress Town, close to the enemy on whom he had been spying. Yet in doing this he had accomplished a great deal and learned much vital information needed in order to counter the moves of the vicious Admiral Luckelew.

He told his friends about Tim Drake, who would be an ally against the foe. And his presence in the settlement had made it possible to warn the property owners, to snatch Branch Watkins from sure death. He had a full, clear picture of their opponents' mode of operation, had ticketed the faces of the bandit chiefs and many of their followers.

Still, while knowing all this was a help, he had yet to weld together forces for action. Admiral Luckelew held the town, the island and his power was growing rather than diminishing. Hatfield was faced with a terrific problem if he was to save these decent Texans, the ranchers, the townsmen, the engineers.

"One thing is sure," he said, blowing bluish tobacco smoke ceilingward. "We don't dare let those pirates join up with the Admiral and really get rollin' our way. It will be a tight squeeze buckin' what

Luckelew can muster now, without a horde of loco, bloodthirsty rascals like that fallin' on our necks."

"You're right, Ranger," nodded Sam Morton grimly. "I've heard tell of that pirate crew. It's said they'll torture folks and after lootin', will burn everything in sight. The Mexican Government's after 'em but so far nobody has been able to catch 'em in the right spot."

"The Admiral's the worst of the lot," declared Hatfield. "I heard him say he'd sick Rafael's band on Cypress Town and then they'd all come out here and blast this ranch and others Luckelew is honin' for. Added to the Eel's and Boggs' gunhands, it will make too big an army for us to brace. Even if we managed to win out we'd lose so many men in the scrap, it would be near as bad as defeat."

"Maybe we should try to sneak our families out of town," said Test nervously.

Hatfield shook his head. "Impossible. There ain't time. And the Eel's holdin' Cypress Town as you know. It would take wagons to transport the women and kids and we'd never make it."

"What do you propose, Ranger?" asked Rutledge. "We're right with you all the way."

"*Bueno.* That's all I want to know. The problem is to stop the pirates before they get set. I've been workin' out plans on how to go about it. We ain't helpless. And I don't aim to stick here and let 'em strike us down like so many sittin' birds."

The officer outlined his daring, detailed plan to them. They listened with bated breath. And Madison Rutledge said heartily, "It's the way, gents. I'm all for it."

So were the others, and they looked more cheerful as Hatfield rose, towering in the low-ceilinged room. "Clean your guns and make ready spare ammunition to tote. Check your mustangs and be sure the boys are rested and ready to ride, gents. As for me I intend to get some shuteye while I can. Come along, Buck."

The enlarged, ruby sun was sinking as Ranger Jim Hatfield emerged from the low ranchhouse and crossed the dusty yard to the corral. The golden sorrel, his war horse, trotted to the gate, whinnying a greeting, nuzzling Hatfield's caressing hand.

Miss Lou Rutledge had prepared a hearty beefsteak dinner for the many hands around her father's home. Men had furbished their weapons, tested cinches, picked mounts for the desperate foray which would decide the fate of Cypress Town and the surrounding range. Naps had been enjoyed so they would be in fighting trim that night.

Hatfield strolled here and there, making sure everything was in order. While he had worked out the battle scheme, still the manner in which it was carried out would make all the difference. Events impossible to foresee might occur, human error enter into the game and wreck the best laid plans.

LYNN'S widow from the Circle 4 and her children, Lou Rutledge, were to be left at the Double R with three older men who were instructed to be ready to run them off at the slightest sign of attack. Light, fast buggies were to be used, horses kept hitched to them, and a sentry up the road would fire a signal if somehow the Eel and his band bypassed the Ranger's forces.

Every possible man would be required if the Admiral was to be checked. Hatfield had Madison Rutledge and his cowhands, the boys from Lynn's, the four townsmen who would be eager to fight their way in to defend their families and home. Branch Watkins was determined to go along, too. Lou Rutledge seemed resigned to this since they were all included. Watkins had slept through the day and the resiliency of youth had quickly restored his strength.

Buck was bright-eyed and alert, his troubles a thing of the past and hardly worth remembering. Buck was busy grooming Old Heart Seven to the last hair of his mane. He had his carbine and belt of ammunition for it, plus a hunting knife. Six-shooters, shotguns and rifles were carried by the members of Hatfield's army.

As dark fell over the land, good-bys were exchanged between the stay-at-homes and those starting on the foray. Then, with the great Ranger leading them on his magnificent gelding, they swung through the wooded lane and came out on the road to Cypress Town.

Hatfield stayed out ahead, scouting the way. He had watchers at the rear of the procession, careful of possible ambush.

Several extra mounts had been brought along in case a horse went lame or had to be turned loose for some other good reason. And the Ranger needed a spare mustang for his purposes.

Madison Rutledge and the cowboys knew the country like a book for it was their range. The moon was rising, a silver, lopsided orb in a starry sky, giving enough light for their operations. Off the Gulf blew a salty breeze, rustling the leaves of mighty trees in wooded areas.

Little was said and Hatfield had ordered no smoking when they drew nearer and nearer to Cypress Town, the settlement's glow visible in the distance. Men were tense before the coming battle. They were thinking it over and it was impossible to anticipate such an action without wondering about the result. A rider would steal a look at a friend, aware that one or the other might well be killed in the melee. Creakings of leather, an occasional tinkle or metal or the click of a shod hoof on a stone sticking from the roadbed, sounded in the night. In swamps myriad frogs piped and there were noisy insects and hunting animals and birds about.

JIM HATFIELD pulled up at a crossroads, where the north-south Gulf highway crossed the route to Cypress Town, still a couple of miles eastward. He checked up, finding the T quiet and deserted. Soon Madison Rutledge came along, pulling up his mustang to consult with the leader. Buck Robertson, Branch Watkins, the townsmen, and the waddies, were reining in as they awaited further orders.

"Here's our turn, Ranger," said Rutledge.

"*Bueno.*" The officer's chinstrap was taut under his determined jaw. The moon shone on his rugged face, his eyes glinting. "We'll ride north now."

Between their position and Cypress Town lay wooded and swampy patches. Moving on they came to a narrow trail along the south margin of Cypress Bayou, the log bridge at the narrows just ahead. The bayou wound on inland.

"All right, here's where we split up," Hatfield said. "Rutledge will go on with me. Branch and Buck, you savvy where the Admiral's barge is. Sneak up on it and if Luckelew's there take him prisoner. Shoot him if he forces it. Buck, keep Goldy for me. And be sure you're on hand at the signal."

The Ranger dismounted. He hung his heavy cartridge belts and revolvers from his sorrel's saddlehorn, leaving his carbine in its boot. Also, he attached his Stetson and spurred boots to Goldy's gear for he could not be hampered with such effects during the first part of his night mission. He put on his moccasins, wrapped a pistol in a square of oiled silk he had fetched along for the purpose, and thrust the gun inside his shirt. Then he got aboard one of the spare Double R mustangs, and with Rutledge at his side, rode at a swift clip northward. The main party, led by Watkins and John Test, disappeared down the bayou trail.

On the north of Cypress Bayou, the path swung inland to avoid the probing fingers of the sea. Rutledge and Hatfield kept going and after a brisk run, reached another crossroads with a deserted hut standing nearby.

"This is it," said the rancher. "I don't see anybody."

They drew up, looking around. The immediate surroundings were bare, reedy fields that appeared to be boggy. But cattle could graze through here. "I hope nothin's gone sour," muttered the officer, as silence held the spot.

Then he caught a low hail. "Ranger Hatfield!"

It came from the dilapidated hut. Hatfield left his horse to cross toward the building as two figures came from the black interior. One was Tim Drake, the engineer whose life the Ranger had saved in Cypress Town.

Drake gripped his hand, teeth gleaming in a smile. He was just as relieved to see the officer as Hatfield was to find him.

"Howdy, Drake. This is Madison Rutledge, chief of the Double R. You should be friends, since we're all fightin' the Admiral."

Tim Drake heartily shook with Rutledge, who had dropped rein and joined them. Drake wore his black leather outfit and he was almost as tall as Hatfield. He swung to introduce his companion, a stockier, old fellow with a broad face decorated by a mustache.

"Meet my pardner, Ned French. I told Ned about you, Ranger. We got here just

after dark and have been waitin' for you."

French and Ranger exchanged greetings, Rutledge following suit. "Where are your boys?" inquired Hatfield.

"Hid over behind that old canal levee," replied Drake, with a wave of his hand.

Hatfield stared. A low bank extended along a narrow waterway but in the shadowed light the fields looked unbroken. Drake and French led them over, calling softly to their followers. Armed fighters, workers and friends enlisted by the engineers, waited in the darkness, protected by the dike.

"We're all set for the strike, gents," drawled the Texas Ranger. "Got to make it tonight. Rafael Palacio and his pirate crew will be in by tomorrow. Here's what you must do."

DRAKE and French listened, nodding now and then as they digested the plan. "Timin' is everything," warned the Ranger. "You must allow enough so I can reach the dock on the south side of Cypress Bayou before yuh open up. Rutledge and his contingent will be west in the woods, ready to rush, savvy? Do a lot shootin' and yellin' and let the Eel glimpse you but don't come in where they'll be able to surround and cut you up."

Drake was the chief of this section, a hard fighting man. He trusted Hatfield implicitly and would carry out orders to the letter. He repeated the instructions to be certain he had them correctly memorized.

"How long will it take me to ride that north shore trail and get across, Rutledge?" asked the Ranger.

"I figure about an hour," Rutledge estimated.

"Me too. If I don't bump into anything sour."

Chances had to be taken to win. The four chiefs rode south together, followed by the engineers' fighters.

North of the log bridge over the bayou, Hatfield took his leave of them. Alone, he pushed along a narrow trail which roughly followed the serpentine twistings of the inlet. Rutledge was to overtake his band while Drake and French were to proceed south, then swing eastward to complete their dangerous job.

Hatfield, on the Double R mustang, snaked through the leafy path. The Eel and his killers had come this way after shooting Vern Lynn. He could glimpse the oily waters of the bayou through the thick foilage growing along its margins. North was open range on which local steers fattened. Frogs and insects kept up a terrific din and a big owl lashed, screeching, across the Ranger's bow. Dank odors of rotting vegetation, of rich black earth, wafted to his flared nostrils.

He saw lights on the other side, knew it was Admiral Luckelew's barge. It stood out against the dark forest over there. Hatfield got down and keeping a hand over his mustang's muzzle, quietly passed the point. There were men on the barge, he could hear their voices across the water, but he could not tell if the Admiral was among them.

Riding on, at last he came abreast of Cypress Town, and the steam tug lay moored at the wharf, a number of smaller boats close to it. Eastward lay the point where he had seen the Eel loading rustled cattle to take out to the island, where the Creole Negroes' huts had been burned and Vern Lynn had died.

He unsaddled the Double R mustang and turned him loose. Tightening his belt, he crept toward the shore. A lantern burned at the tug's masthead and it seemed deserted but it was never left without a skeleton crew. Boggs' main bunch were undoubtedly up Ocean Avenue, drinking at the Dolphin.

Mud smeared on his cheeks killed the sheen of flesh. "Here's goes," he thought.

He waded into the shallows, the warm water seeping into his moccasins. It was unpleasant, a bit scary launching himself into the black, oily bayou, though he had swum it before. A frog croaked and jumped with a slight splash from a sunken log which in the faint light had the aspect of a great alligator.

CHAPTER XIII

Strike

USING a powerful racing stroke, Hatfield eased across the bayou, swimming with thrusts of his long legs and

arms. The tide slowly carried him down but he made no splashings. He kept watching the blunt-nosed tug. Steamy sounds of a hot boiler came to him and the boat was prepared to leave at quick notice. He sought to locate the deck guard but from such a low position he could not see over the rail.

His feet touched oozy bottom a few yards below the tug. He drew them up and floated in, among a flock of small boats, catching hold of a dory's stern, the bulk of it hiding him from the tug. He regained his breath, looking around and listening.

From the Dolphin, up Ocean Avenue, issued the raucous shouts of gunhands, the strains of guitars and fiddles. No alarm yet. Cypress Town was running along as it had since the Eel had taken over. Mounted sentries, and others afoot patrolled the ways. Extra lanterns had been strung on posts through the town to help the watchers do their job. The settlement bristled with heavily armed enemies and the Admiral was planning to strike with whirlwind force when Palacio's pirates arrived on the field.

Hatfield was impelled by a dread urgency, aware he must counter George Luckelew swiftly, unerringly. The run from the Double R, the rendezvous with Drake and French, which the officer had arranged the night he had saved Tim Drake, the approach across the bayou, had consumed hours. It was very late. Most peaceable citizens were long since abed. And the presence of the ferocious toughs had cowed the decent elements of Cypress Town.

"Timin'," thought the Ranger. "I hope things pan out right for us."

He inched to the shore, crouching behind the end of the wharf. He was soaked but his pistol was dry, ready for use.

The wait seemed interminable. He heard a man cough on the tug, and a couple of them talking together in low tones. A ship's clock chimed four bells. Then a single gunshot rapped out, startlingly loud, from the west side of Cypress Town. The Ranger became alert.

So did his enemies, the street sentinels, the Eel and his killers at the Dolphin, Commodore Boggs and his crew. Those on the tug, half a dozen strong, came to the near rail, armed with shotguns and cutlasses, revolvers. They remained aboard however, staring up Ocean Avenue.

That first explosion had no time to grow lonesome for it was quickly joined by blaring volleys. Lying flat, Hatfield could peek over the low bank and see some of the action. A few outlaws pelted across the plaza, yelling and shooting an alarm. Stabbing guns flamed from the west as Drake and French roared in with their men, whooping it up as they let go with everything they had.

Hatfield watched as the sinuous Porfirio Palacio, Anguila, the Eel, roared from the Dolphin, bellowing commands to his army of gunslingers. Mustangs were ready saddled—had been ever since Hatfield had escaped with Branch Watkins, under close guard. The bandits jumped to saddle, and bunches streamed across the plaza to check the advance of the engineers.

The powerful Ranger girded himself, his turn for fighting having come. He could move with little fear of being overheard now by the tug crew. The echoing guns blasted the signal.

By now, Hatfield knew that Madison Rutledge, with his cowboys, the townsmen, Buck and Branch Watkins, should be hidden close by in the woods on the south side of Cypress Bayou. Unless something had gone radically wrong, this contingent should be pushing up.

DRAKE and French, with orders to retire and draw off the Eel's main forces, were making a lot of noise. As Palacio drove his killers at the engineers they tightened rein and galloped away, shooting back to attract the outlaws. Anguila and his massed gunhands tore after them, eager to overtake their enemies.

A quick glance showed that the Eel had gone. The wideset figure of Sharkey Boggs, with several of his sailors, appeared on the front veranda of the Dolphin.

The watchers on the tug were in the bow, observing the scrap up the road. The low stern was nearer Hatfield, and the Ranger slipped again into the warm water, making only low sounds drowned in the general commotion. He held to a thick rope, a line making the craft fast at that end of the pier.

A minute later Rebel yells, high-pitched in timbre, Colt shots, rang from the bayou

trail. Madison Rutledge, John Test, Branch Watkins, Buck Robinson and a line of fighting men burst down the path toward the steam tug.

The handful on the boat set up a howl of alarm and hastily opened fire at the approaching horsemen. Hatfield pulled himself to the rear deck with a mighty surge. He drew and cocked the six-shooter he had so carefully nursed.

Lightly he ran past the engine room hatch and to the budge of the pilot house. He raised the Colt and sent two heavy slugs into the deck just behind the crouching defenders. "Toss your guns over the rail or you'll catch lead," he roared.

Aware of the desperate threat at their uncovered backs, the crew hesitated. Then a couple yelped, and dived over the side into the water. The others let go their weapons, raising their hands in token of surrender.

In a swift rush the riders came to the wharf. They threw themselves from their saddles as Hatfield held the sailors under guard. In the yellowish lanternlight, the silver star on silver circle shone.

"Texas Rangers!" gasped a prisoner.

Sharkey Boggs had heard the bursts of gunfire, the warning calls from the tug. The dark shadows of the horsemen showed at the bayou end of the street. Boggs pointed, howling orders. He hastily assembled his crew and they came trotting down Ocean Avenue.

"Watkins, Buck, Test!" Hatfield indicated several men. "Here, get aboard. Rutledge, ride off with the rest like you're retreatin', but don't go far." He was quickly obeyed. An excellent field general, Hatfield knew how to get results.

COMMODORE Sharkey Boggs gripped a sawed-off shotgun in his hands as he rolled toward his tug. Shots were exchanged with Rutledge's party who slowly backed away as Boggs dashed to the wharf. Boggs darted ahead, singing out to those aboard.

"Come on, Commodore," called the Ranger, in a falsetto much like that of a crew member he had captured.

Boggs vaulted the rail to the deck. The Ranger stepped around the wheel house, showing his tall figure for an instant. "Drop it, Boggs!" he yelled. "This is the law!"

The commodore gasped, recognizing his tall foe. He spread his thick, wide legs, raising the shotgun and Hatfield jumped back. Buckshot rattled into the desk and slashed splinters from the wooden curve of the pilot house. Sharkey Boggs would not surrender. Hatfield had offered him a chance to quit, as the Rangers did with the worst of outlaws.

Rutledge and his strong band came whirling back, to sweep up the men on the dock. These had to turn and defend themselves.

The superstructure protected Hatfield as he squatted low on the deck. Boggs still had another loaded barrel in the shotgun, and the maddened commodore, bull roars in his throat, his face crimson with fury, charged across the deck. He held his shotgun at his hip, finger on the second trigger.

The Ranger had to shoot and fast. Against the town's light, and under the lantern hung from the mast, Boggs bulked wide as a wall. But the commodore was after him, the trigger convulsively jerked as Hatfield let go.

Spreading metal pellets drove through the air, some splintering deck, rail and pilot house. One burned along the flesh of the Ranger's upper arm, extended to wield his Colt. As the officer involuntarily winced, Sharkey Boggs lunged straight toward him.

Doubled up by his own momentum, Boggs crashed hard to the tug's deck. The shotgun rattled from his relaxing grip.

The heavy body nearly struck Hatfield who felt the flesh wound in his shoulder bleeding. He had his revolver raised for another try but held his fire as Boggs came up against the rail and did not move.

Buck Robertson leaped to his side. "Jim! Are you hurt?"

"Nothin' much," muttered the Ranger. He gritted his teeth, pulling himself together.

Branch Watkins and a couple more friends hurried to the breach. Their directed fire stampeded the sailors on the dock and Rutledge was tearing in, swinging a loop around them. Nudged to the bayou shore by the shooting riders, the commodore no longer there to command them, Boggs' followers began to surrender.

Hatfield drew in a deep breath of the damp, salty air. He crossed the deck and

putting a foot on the low rail, jumped to the wharf. Shrill whistles issued from his lips, and Goldy, his great sorrel, was turned loose, trotting to him. The men had fetched the gelding along as they stole down the south shore.

"Hustle, hustle," urged Hatfield. He was strapping on his cartridge belts with the twin pistols in the supple, oiled holsters. He donned his Stetson and made the chinstrap taut, unshipped his loaded carbine, kicked off the moccasins and pulled on his spurred riding boots. Wiping his face, he was ready to lead the main attack. "Toss their guns into the water, boys. Test, take six men and guard the cusses. We'll settle their hash later."

Screaming calls from the Dolphin told that the handful left there by the Eel had not missed the action at the pier. A horseman darted across Ocean Avenue, quirting west to take the warning to the main band who had been drawn off after Drake and French.

On the sorrel, Jim Hatfield galloped up the center of Ocean Avenue, his eyes darting left and right for signs of resistance. A bullet from the gun of an outlaw on the Dolphin porch shrieked past his head. He raised a Colt, his reply clearing the entry. Madison Rutledge, Branch Watkins and Buck, townsmen and cowboys, tore in the Ranger's wake.

"Watkins! Get around back and grab whatever comes out," shouted Hatfield. He hit ground, pistol in hand, and ducked under the hitchrail. As he charged into the saloon, his friends were right with him.

ROARING weapons banged in the Dolphin. Bartenders, the proprietor, and the few neutrals who had been present, had ducked behind the bar or rushed from the main room. And only a handful of the Eel's followers were in town at the moment.

These outlaws saw the tall man with the Ranger star pinned on, the rising guns of the avengers. A couple of the killers skidded in the damp sawdust as they hastily turned tail and ran out the rear doors. The others tossed down their guns, dropping to the floor and begging for mercy.

Hatfield heard a shot and a challenge. Watkins and those he had sent around were capturing the bandits who had managed to get outside. . . .

"Anybody see Admiral Luckelew?" inquired Hatfield, as his friends gathered about him for further orders.

"No," answered Madison Rutledge. "He wasn't on that barge of his. We took a peek on the way here, Ranger, and he sure ain't around town."

Above all, Hatfield felt he must arrest the Admiral, prime instigator of the Cypress Bayou trouble.

Yet there was not time now. No one realized it better than the Ranger that they had not yet won. "Come on, boys! We still have to brace the Eel and his bunch," he warned. "Chances are they'll try to reach those boats and make for the island when they find they're ringed." He pointed out half a dozen men. "You fellers stay here with me, and the rest go with Rutledge. Rutledge, you rush back and secure those boats and the dock. Hide your fighters till the enemy is close."

"Yes, Ranger!" Rutledge and his friends were most enthusiastic about the officer's efficient power, ready to jump to it at his orders.

The rancher hurried forth with the main band while Hatfield disposed his cowboy marksmen behind the bar and himself took a stand where he commanded the entry.

They did not have long to wait. War whoops and shots announced the return of the outlaws, the messenger sent from the Dolphin having overtaken Porfirio Palacio. Hatfield could see from the wide front window, and watched the approach. The sinuous Eel, Anguila, rode a lathered bay at crazy speed across the plaza. Knots of armed desperadoes, Texans and Mexicans, drove after their chief. Shotguns, carbines and Colts made up the bristling array of firearms carried by the toughs.

Hatfield pouched his six-shooter, picking up a loaded, double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. He crouched at the end of the counter, warning his men to stay down. The Eel ripped his rein, bringing his fiery steed to a sliding stop which threw billowing dust into the air. Palacio jumped off his saddle and, one of his silver-inlaid revolvers in a brown hand, vaulted the rail and charged into the Dolphin. At his jingling cartwheel spurs came a knot of lieutenants as slower mounts still crossed

the commons toward the saloon.

"Palacio!" The Ranger's clear, incisive voice brought the snaky killer to a sudden halt just inside.

The dark eyes in his narrow face flamed with red hate as he took in the tall officer and the shotgun resting on the counter. The Eel knew only to well what the silver star on silver circle meant.

"Rangaire!" he shrieked.

Such a brief flash of time could hardly be measured save as an impression. Hatfield had to judge by instinct, by training in such situations. Anguila was very fast, faster than most men with a Colt. And in his towering rage he tried to kill the Texas Ranger.

The roar of the shotgun filled the room. The pearl-handled revolver spoke too. But the buckshot had struck first and the Eel was lashing around as he fired. Spreading lead from the double barrels cut the startled gunhands behind Palacio. From Hatfield's cowboys, as they jumped up from their hiding places, came triumphant shouts and a blast of fire. The Eel's followers did not hesitate as they saw their leader sink to the sawdust. There was a scramble to get out, escape.

"There they go, headin' for the landin'," cried Hatfield.

HE RUSHED around the end of the bar, paused to check up on the Eel who was done for. Through the windows, cracked as bullets zinged holes in the glass, he saw the riders turning toward Cypress Bayou, while those who had dismounted were hitting leather without touching iron in the panic to get away. For a long line of horsemen came shooting in from the west, spread out in a sweeping formation.

"Here come Drake and French," sang out Hatfield. Tim Drake had carried out his instructions well, first drawing off and distracting the Eel, then rushing back to join in the cleanup.

"Outside, boys," called the Ranger. "Shoo 'em north."

His few cowboys ran with him to the sidewalk and their bullets hurried the smashed bandits on into Madison Rutledge's arms. Hatfield gave shrill whistles and the golden sorrel galloped to him. Mounting, he signaled to the leather-clad Tim Drake, who was coming at the head of his fighters.

The line swept around, through Cypress Town, forcing the killers to the water. Skillfully, Hatfield and Drake sped up their wings and closed in. Madison Rutledge had covered the trail along the bayou and as guns flamed in their faces, the shocked outlaws found themselves driven into the trap.

As the Ranger rode up to the landing, they were throwing down their weapons, surrendering in droves.

"Now for the Admiral," he thought. He must locate the chief of operations.

CHAPTER XIV

Chief

PUFFING out clouds of steam, the steam tug slowly chugged toward the island. A few yellow lanterns glittered here and there but dawn was at hand, paling the sky ahead.

Ranger Hatfield stood in the bow, staring toward the camp, where the Admiral held his workers. There would be some guards about and Hatfield hoped that George Luckelew might be close at hand. He had been unable to gain any definite news as to where the Admiral had gone. If Luckelew had been in Cypress Town earlier in the evening, he had certainly left before the full-scale attack opened.

John Test and other townsmen, finding their families unharmed, had been left on the mainland to guard the large numbers of prisoners taken in the stunning raid. The first phase of the battle had been won by the Ranger's strategy and tactics, by his great leadership.

The tired fighting men had enjoyed a hot meal, coffee and other drinks before embarking. They had caught the tug engineers and with the total smashup of Boggs and his crew, a couple had wilted and agreed to handle the craft under Ranger orders. Branch Watkins knew how to steer and they had headed across the lagoon for the isle.

Madison Rutledge, Tim Drake, Buck Robertson and others stood close by Hatfield. In the pilot house Watkins peered through the morning mists, handling the

vessel. The engines were slowing as the chunky, shallow-draught boat began easing in.

From the beach, rifles dully flamed in the grayness. Men in the bow ducked behind the heavy rail as defenders opened fire on the crowded steam tug. The area around the workers' barracks was deserted save for a couple of the Admiral's guards lying flat in the sand as they worked their guns.

"Maybe he's here," murmured Hatfield, thinking of Luckelew.

There were some dories along the shore but they provided scant protection for the gunhands as the Ranger gave orders to shoot back. Watkins skillfully sided in the tug, and the boat gently grounded in the soft bottom, the engine beat diminishing, steam hissing from the valves.

As the light grew better, the position of the camp guards became untenable. They were jumping up, running back. Some stopped at the frail shacks which formed their quarters.

"There's the Admiral, Jim!" sang out the sharp-eyed Buck.

"Where?"

Eagerly, Buck pointed. George Luckelew's large, burly figure showed at the guards' camp. He had just emerged from one of the huts and wore his blue suit with the brass buttons. As he glanced over a shoulder at the tug, the black smudges of his whiskers were visible. In his left hand he carried a high-powered rifle, and he hurried to a saddled horse in the grove of trees close by.

"Let's get after the sidewinder," said the Ranger. "That's the Admiral, all right."

The water was waist deep as the Ranger eased over the side. A bullet slapped along the wooden rail over his head. Blasts from the tug's deck sent the last of the island defenders scurrying down the beach.

Shielded as they jumped in by the bulk of the boat, the attackers waded ashore. Branch Watkins sang out, as men in the tents stared from the opened flaps.

"Come on, fellers! You're free," he shouted loudly.

Some of them emerged, not yet sure of what this meant. But as they were not fired upon, they gathered in groups to watch as their former captors were driven off.

HATFIELD, Drake, Rutledge and Buck, Ned French, led the attack, slowly south along the strand. Heavy blasts from their weapons soon drove out the gunslingers around the huts, and the guards' camp was deserted as the Admiral's bunch took to the tall timber below.

"Watch it through the woods," ordered the Ranger. "Spread out there. They may be waitin' in ambush."

Carbine up and leveled, he scouted along the path winding through the woods to the Gulf side of the island. He flushed several enemies from the underbrush and this delayed the advance for a time as they shot it out and ran the lurking gunhands out of the way.

The fresh indentations of shod hoofs in the soft spots told that Luckelew had come through. Eagerly, the officer trailed his arch-enemy.

Half a mile down from the camp they broke out onto the cliff, with the sun showing its upper arc in ruby flame. Small waves disturbed the deep-blue of the Gulf and the Ranger sighted Admiral Luckelew off to his right, below on the beach.

The Admiral was waving his cap, facing toward the water. Coming slowly in was a black schooner with faded, streaked hull breasting the sea. It was under sail but had an auxiliary steam engine, a small funnel sticking from its waist. The foredeck was swarming with men, many of them wearing whites and straw hats. And Hatfield knew that Rafael Palacio had arrived with his pirate band.

Luckelew was bawling at them, signaling them in. There was no time to lose. The boat seemed alive with the fierce killers. They gripped guns of all types, cutlasses, machetes.

Hatfield slid down the steep, rocky break to the sand and began running at the Admiral. He fired once and Luckelew turned, cursing at him and shooting with his heavy rifle. The Ranger's friends padded after him, hoarse battle cries rising in their throats.

The guns were crackling across the narrowing gap as the pirates sighted the vigilantes who had come to welcome them to Texas. Luckelew waded knee-deep into the shallows, saw he could not make it, swung to empty his rifle again at the Ranger.

But now the slugs were kicking up spray and shrieking about the Admiral's head. He turned and rushed for the protection of the cliff, out of Hatfield's sight.

The schooner grounded a hundred yards from shore. Pirates jumped into the sea, wading for the beach. But the first comers never reached the strand. They could not take fair aim from the water, and the accurate cowboys and Drake's friends could pick them off. A tall, thin figure in whites, wearing an officer's gold-trimmed cap, showed in the schooner's bow, raving at his men. He beat at some with the flat of his cutlass, trying to force them to the attack.

Hatfield studied the sallow-faced Mexican. "Dollars to doughnuts that's Rafael Palacio," he muttered, raising his carbine.

His shot must have stung Rafael for the pirate chief fell down on his face, but jumped up and dived into the cabin. Many of the pirates, met by the hot fire from the beach, began swarming back up dangling ropes to their boat.

A cheer rang over the scene. The rakish black schooner was being pushed off by frantic sailors with long poles. Smoke belched from the funnel, as the engine took hold. The pirates had had enough. Backing off, leaving some luckless men in the sea, the black schooner swung south for Mexico.

"They don't cotton to Texas," drawled Tim Drake, rising from shooting position to stand beside the Ranger.

"You did it, Hatfield," cried Madison Rutledge. "We've sure won!"

"Grab those hombres out there, gents, and add 'em to the collection," ordered the Ranger. "I still got a little job of work to do."

HE STRODE down the beach, watching carefully as he neared the spot where the Admiral had disappeared. No shots greeted him. There was a narrow, steep but negotiable rock slide up the eroded cliffs to the woods fringing the shore.

Gun drawn, Hatfield climbed to the summit. Brush and trees faced him and he paused to listen but heard nothing. There was no sign of Luckelew. He looked down, saw the imprint of a man's boot heel, and trailing this sign, he slowly worked through the brush, hunting his foe.

Some steers and horses startled him as they moved from his approach. He soon crossed the narrow island, glimpsing the lagoon and the Texas shore through a vista. A hundred yards from the beach he sighted the Admiral, paddling a pirogue for dear life as he fled from the Ranger.

Rushing forward, Hatfield raised his carbine, standing in the shallows.

"Luckelew! You're under arrest."

The Admiral swung, kneeling in the hollowed out little craft. His black bearded face was twisted with his fury. The rifle in the tall officer's hands meant surrender or death unless the Admiral could somehow down the tall man.

Luckelew tried, falling forward, snatching up the powerful rifle which he had kept by him. He turned in the constricted space to take aim. He was kneeling and the Ranger saw the muzzle's black eye coming around for the kill.

He threw in a slug from his carbine. It hit the side of the boat and the unsteady pirogue tilted, nearly capsizing as the Admiral's ominous bullet droned over Hatfield.

[*Turn page*]

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

Luckelew frantically tried again but this time Ranger lead caught him and the gun fell from the Admiral's relaxing hands. Luckelew keeled over, all his weight on one gunwale, and the pirogue went all the way, dumping him into the lagoon.

Hatfield waded forward, the water shallow. The pirogue was bottom up, slowly drifting away from the Admiral's body which the Ranger could partially see as it broke the surface, the blue coat darkened by the sea. . . .

* * * * *

Gladly, Anita Robertson embraced her brother Buck, and then turned to smile up into the gray-green eyes of the mighty Texas Ranger.

"I just knew you'd be back today," she cried. "I'm so happy to see you both."

"I'm hungry, sis," declared Buck, impatient at the show of affection.

"Dinner's all ready for you."

But soon, Hatfield rode on, to report to Captain Bill McDowell at Headquarters. McDowell, too, was delighted to see him, not only because he valued Hatfield so highly but because there was always work for a Ranger.

The old captain listened to the story of the great fight on the Gulf coast.

"A channel for deep-water ships up Cypress Bayou would have made that settlement a thrivin' port, suh," explained Hatfield. "There would have been a turnin' basin, plenty of docks, and the land would have jumped high in value. Luckelew stole the idea from Drake and French, as the Admiral stole whatever he wanted. Luckelew wanted the surroundin' range for the same reason. Railroads would sure have come to the port, and he could sell timber from the woods for pilin's and other purposes. Commerce and settlers would have flocked to Cypress Town. On Luckelew's fancy barge, where he lived, I dug out city plans, showin' he was all ready to advertise and sell lots at a stiff price to business firms and newcomers. He had to get rid of Rutledge and the legal owners, of course, before he could grab everything."

McDOWELL grunted in satisfaction as he heard how the Ranger had dealt with the Eel, Sharkey Boggs and Admiral Luckelew.

"So Branch Watkins, from New England, is hitchin' up with Rutledge's daughter. And you set free the men they were workin' on the island. What about Drake and French?"

"They got most of their stuff back. They say that if Rutledge, Test and the others are agreeable and want it, they'll shift to Cypress Town and make their channel there. It would be a great thing for those folks."

"Fine, fine. I see you left everything in good shape as you always do."

For a time they smoked together, the blue smoke rising to the ceiling. Then the old captain rattled a sheaf of papers.

"These reports now," he muttered. "I reckon you're plumb wore out, Hatfield."

"I'm in first-class shape, suh, and ready to go," smiled the Ranger.

"Trouble, trouble! You can find it easy without huntin' it, from where the Rangers sit," rumbled McDowell.

Jim Hatfield studied the complaints. When he had ticketed the information in his keen mind, he rose to say good-by, shaking hands with his commander.

And Captain McDowell watched him, as he mounted the beautiful golden sorrel, knowing that Hatfield carried the law to the far reaches of Texas.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE LOBO LEGION

Another Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

GUN KIN

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

Crumtown kinfolks give Doyle Wilcox such a hearty welcome, he almost dies laughing!

Doyle smacked Sig into a round-topped table

THREE riders moved indistinctly through the creek scrub. A fourth horse seemed to be packed. That was what young Doyle Wilcox thought, when he first saw them from the Crumtown trail. He looked again into the west where the low sun slanted a path of yellow. It made the riders fuzzy. Now he observed that there was, after all, apparently four of them.

Something was wrong with one of them. Two supported him from the sides. Drunk? An oath echoed on the air. The supported man must have slipped from his companions' grasp, for he went over the off side of his horse to the ground beyond Doyle's sight.

The unburdened horse snorted. The three remaining men, showing darkly indistinct, gathered in a knot to gaze at the ground.

This being none of his business Doyle

passed from the trail side where he'd halted beside a towering hunk of granite, over the creek and went on toward Crumtown.

He could see the cowtown clearly after the last timber dwindled to nothing, sliced by the regular stage and freight road.

Doyle's not unhandsome face turned to scrutinize Crumtown, a place he had never seen before. It drew his interest because from here, his deceased mother had journeyed to the Cross 7, on the northern side of Spotted Cat Mountain. Here lived relatives he had only heard about.

His venturing this far from home range came about because his father said one day, "Yuh're twenty, Doyle, and growed plumb man size. I 'low maybe yuh could go down to Crumtown and see yore ma's kin, the Tubbs."

Doyle had been born and raised on Spotted Cat Mountain, getting some schooling at Rising Moon. That town was shipping point at the end of a spur railroad; consequently it had never been necessary to ship from such a large place as Crumtown, more than a hundred miles south.

PROSPECT of finally going there to visit his mother's brother's family hadn't seemed such a good idea at first. Only, his father kept insisting. They got down a mail-order catalogue and sent away for some "finery" as his father called the fancy new clothes, in order to look his best while visiting Crumtown.

The dusk hid much of the place when Doyle rode in, but there was, he knew from the last daylight, one great wide street running north and south, a big collection of business places on it and a large residential section on the east. The first livery barn he reached on the west side of the dirt street did not boast a name. Under the light of a hanging lantern in front, the whiskered hostler looked honest enough.

When his big bay horse was put away, a question elicited the information that Crumtown Inn stood on the next block.

"Yuh know a family named Tubbs hereabouts?" he asked.

The hostler gave him a keen glance, spitting away a well chewed wad of Brown Mule.

"Reckon. Old man's got the biggest store in town. If yuh means them two boys, Big and Short, only a houn' dog would know where they're at. Got the Post House Ranch northwest on the crick. When they ain't feudin' with the Dolans they're fightin' amongst themselves. Uh," he paused to give Doyle a closer scrutiny, "yuh a particular friend of theirs?"

Doyle admitted never having seen them. He walked down the street, passing a freight wagon going north that kicked up dust in the waning heat of day. In the fly tattered lobby of the Inn he got a room from a walrus-faced old man, and cleaned himself of trail alkali.

The cracked mirror over the washstand showed a well knit figure in blue broadcloth trousers and a black shirt that boasted white piping at the seams and fastened on the right chest with enormous pearl buttons. Even Doyle's boots were new, and his fawn colored sombrero bore a horsehair band adorned with a huge silver concho. Pretty fancy rig-out he'd bought from the mail-order house. Doyle frowned once as he scrutinized himself anew. Maybe such fancy clothes wouldn't go so well in Crumtown. Folks might take him for a dude.

On the street he wandered past blocks of saloons before coming to a restaurant. Most of the stores were closed. Tomorrow, when he sort of got his bearings, would be time enough to go barging in on relatives who didn't know him.

It was a large restaurant he entered, where diners gave him deeply curious stares. Booted men came and went while he got around a thick steak and apple pie. There was no open comment, yet Doyle felt decidedly self-conscious.

When he strolled leisurely back onto the street, the summer heat had lessened enough to remove the cauldronlike feeling of the town set in the middle of a vast sea of grass. He turned north, considering. The first saloon of interest was too blatantly noisy and gleaming with lights. Doyle passed on, coming to a place almost dim with darkness, and so silent he wondered at first if it could be open.

The slats were loose in the half doors. Inside he found a light after all. A chimneyed, brass affair hanging in supports from a smoke blackened ceiling in the forepart of the barnlike structure. Only

three customers in the place, whom the fattish bartender seemed to avoid while cat-napping with elbows on the mahogany.

Doyle considered a soda first, then changed his mind because of likely adverse comment in a land of hard drinkers. He asked for beer, and got a wire fastened, bellied blue bottle.

He took no more than a swallow when the saloon seemed to come apart all over. Only two men entered, but what men! They were young giants and they blew in shaking the floor with heavy steps. The bartender promptly came fully awake, on guard. The three customers slithered with whispering sounds into the darker recesses.

The pair wore heavy cowhide boots, ponderous guns on each right leg, worn levis, somewhat faded blue percale shirts and floppy hats. Either could have stood a face wash or a shave. Their hair was so red as to be totally startling.

Doyle kept his head down, attending to his own business. The pair split up, one taking a stand on each side of him, yet at least two feet away. They called for whiskey simultaneously in voices that rang throughout the saloon, curling back in echoes from the ceiling.

Doyle was just over six-foot in height, but this strange pair stood chin and mouth above him. The one on the right drank his whiskey in one gulp, shouting for more.

"Lookit," the bartender was annoyed, fearful of damaging results, "yuh remember last time yuh took the town apart, what Sheriff Harry Joiner swore?"

"Pour!" came the roaring answer. "Why, us is the gentlest of bear cubs, podner!"

DOYLE thought, "yeah, like cyclones." Abruptly he was shoved violently to the right. The cowboy below gave him a playful lick.

He drawled loudly, "Look, us has a purty stranger in our midst. Make him welcome!"

Flushed of face, Doyle tried to turn. The other shouting, "Tic, tack, toe!" hurled him back towards his companion. The other promptly boosted him back again. They were bouncing Doyle between them, laughing uproariously.

"Ain't he so purty, he's sweet?" the one up the bar cried. The bartender warned them not to go too far. But Doyle was already through. He was shoved down the bar once more. This time as the other raised his arms to slam him back, he struck straight for the jaw. The cowboy was caught off guard. He went down, and fast.

Doyle swung about on his heels, balanced himself and went for the lower one.

"So you wanta play it rough, eh?" that worthy cried between tight lips in a face from which all humor disappeared. He struck, a hammy fist on an arm of solid iron that swept past Doyle's shifted head. Doyle's own blow sank home, driving the cowboy against the bar, from which Doyle doubled him up with a left in the middle and then deliberately kicked him away from the brass rail.

That hurt. The cowboy came around, obviously bent on murder. Doyle smacked him into a round-topped table. It crashed and splintered two chairs under the redhead's enormous body. Doyle made for him, reaching to pull him up from the floor and finish the job. The cowboy sprang up with him, hurled Doyle to the left where he in turn bowled a table into kindling wood.

Coming up, panting for fresh air, Doyle squared and started to charge. From nowhere the rungs of a chair came down over his face and the bottom crowned his head. Doyle plummeted into oblivion by the outrageous attack from behind. . . .

The sun, Doyle thought, must be setting in the wrong place. He grew aware of a streak of light in the sky, and more quickly of water being sloshed over his face from a rain barrel. The tepid stuff contained wiggle-tails, and he gagged and choked trying to evade the next pail. He pulled himself up to a sitting position, head bursting and filled with the knowledge that his fancy shirt and red neckerchief were wet.

"I thought I come into Crumtown after sundown," he muttered, trying to get his bearings, discovering both his hat and his money intact. That surprised him because he lay out behind the unpainted saloon building on rubbish-covered ground.

"Yuh could of," a rusty voice answered. A bucket rattled as it went down beside

the barrel. "It's sun-up. Found yuh hyar on my way to swamp out."

Doyle got gingerly to his feet, trying to clean his clothing some. The swamper was a lean, wizened man of uncertain age.

"Wonder yuh didn't get rolled, sleepin' off a drunk out hyar," the swamper said.

But Doyle hadn't been drunk. Likely he'd been dragged here, expected to regain his senses shortly. Instead he'd slept out the night. The swamper went on to the back door, unlocked it and entered. Aware of a swollen jaw and an aching head where the chair got him, Doyle brushed off and rounded through an alley to the Inn. He cleaned up better in his room, though his fancy clothes did not shine like they had yesterday. A couple of hours rest on the bed left him in better condition.

Back at the restaurant hot coffee and some food almost completed the job of restoration. All that remained of last night's escapade was a smouldering resentment over the foul play he had received at the dirty hands of the chair wielder. The idea grew in him that he would set forth without delay to remedy that.

The Tubbs might perchance identify the pair of redheaded giants. Therefore he crossed to the east side of the street.

The largest, two story building bore the legend "Tubbs' General Mercantile." He went into a cool interior. The place exhibited counters on both sides of the great room and across the far end, but no customers. A girl considered him curiously from behind the dress goods counter. She was redheaded, which gave Doyle a momentary start. From there, any resemblance to his late adversaries ended. She was small, but well put together. About twenty, Doyle thought. This morning no smile crinkled her eyes. This girl was worried.

"Mornin', ma'am," Doyle removed his hat as he came near. "Would Mr. Tubbs be around?"

"Presuming you mean my father," replied the girl, "no. He's over talking to Judge Willson and won't return for maybe an hour."

Doyle hesitated. Then, "They any more male Tubbs? Seems to me they should be."

IMMEDIATELY her eyes frosted.

"There are," she admitted coldly. "Big's in jail, and Short has headed for the tall timber." Her expression changed. "You wouldn't be looking for a job? We do need a man at Post House Ranch until my brothers get themselves out of one more scrape."

"They in trouble, ma'am?"

"You could call it such. The Dolans came in last night. They found Earl Ballinger shot dead on the upper creek, and swore Big and Short must have done it. The sheriff and the marshal tried to put them under arrest. Big got creased on the head and fell down. Short got away from them. Don't you know this already?"

"No, ma'am. Don't your brothers get along with the Dolans?"

"Get along with them?" She shuddered. "Ever since Steve Dolan moved onto the lower end of the creek with his two nephews they've been scrapping. Ballinger was their foreman."

"Hmm, this Dolan a land grabber?" Doyle asked. His kin, the Tubbs brothers could be too, but for the moment he would give them benefit of the doubt.

"Not exactly," said the girl. "The Dolans want more water from the creek. That creek *makes* the two ranches with headquarters on it. Is there anything I can do for you, cowboy? I'm Melissa Tubbs."

"I—uh, I reckon I ought to see one of the men folks," he decided.

"Seeing Big is very simple," she told him dryly. "He's going to be in one place for quite a spell now."

"They trouble makers, ma'am?"

"No," she shook her head. "Just two men who never grew up."

"I'll be back." Replacing his hat, he went out on the street. Obviously, from her attitude, Melissa's brothers were usually in some kind of shenanigans. However, she didn't believe them guilty of shooting this Ballinger. Otherwise, she would have been really worried.

The sheriff's office and jail was on the next side street, a small wooden building squatting against some warehouses, with a shed to the right. A lanky man chewing a wad of tobacco raised up inquiringly from a broken chair that rested against the iron barred wall dividing the room in half. He wore a badge proclaiming his

identity as sheriff. Washed out eyes studied Doyle, lost interest and wandered away.

"Yuh got a feller named Tubbs in jail, I hear tell," Doyle began.

"Right." Sheriff Joiner waved a hand vaguely at the bars extending from floor to ceiling.

In the darker recesses a big man lay flat on his face on a bunk. Voices stirred him. Sheriff Joiner called, "Feller wants to see yuh, Big." The prone one got up, displaying a bare head—one complete mass of thick, blazing red hair. He came up to the bars, placing both hammy hands around iron as though it were kindling wood. The left side of his face was obscured by dried blood, and Big had a bullet furrow through the hair. Burning, rage-filled orbs glared at Doyle, who rocked on his feet in sudden deep satisfaction.

"So yore ornery brother took a run-out?" he drawled, promptly forgetting his new knowledge that the pair were his kin folks. "He would—the ratty bushwhacking chair handler! Wal, I knows which one of you to scalp as soon as I can get my hands on him!"

"You!" Big Tubbs exploded.

"Yeah, me! Yuh don't look too bad off from the whoppin' I gave yuh before yore cussed brother took a hand. But I'll be around to take care of that if they don't hang yuh!"

Big roared, "Lemme outa hyar, Joiner!" His arms worked and the cell bars trembled in their retaining pieces, shaking the small building. "Jist one minute is all I need to murder this blow-hard!"

"Now, now, Big," Sheriff Joiner came around on his feet in concern. "Don't yuh go to wreckin' this here jail."

Big snorted, gave the bars one final rattle, and stalking back to the bunk, flopped down.

"That feller is so powerful he could tear his way out," Sheriff Joiner said glumly, when he followed Doyle as far as the street door.

"Posse after Short Tubbs? How come they're called that?"

"They had to have some kinda name. Short is a year under Big so he got that'n, though they're exactly the same size now. No need to hunt Short. Kinda playful fellers. Short'll be back. Especially with his old man sending him word to come in an' give hisself up. I ain't shore in my own mind they murdered Ballinger noways."

"Some doubt, eh? Wal, Sheriff, is the place where Ballinger was killed on the upper creek, close to the north trail comin' into town?"

DOYLE was remembering the four riders he'd seen, principally the one who had fallen out of his saddle.

"What do yuh know about it?" All at once the indolent appearing sheriff went cunning. Deep in his narrowed eyes lurked intelligence. Doyle wondered if something about the death scene struck him as peculiar. If that four rider deal meant anything, then Ballinger's body must have been brought there. In which case the absence of blood on the ground might be the fact bothering the sheriff, the clue convincing him there was something wrong about the crime. He must be missing something.

"I rode in that way," Doyle drawled. "And I was wonderin', is all."

"Keep goin'. I like to hear you wonder out loud."

"Why, that's all. To my recollection I never laid eyes on the Dolans. Or them Tubbs, before last night." That was it Doyle remembered. He couldn't identify the riders in the creek scrub. Not yet anyway, and before he stuck his nose into this affair it would be wise to know more about the scheme of things.

"I seen the tracks yore hoss made," the sheriff said quietly, "right where yuh stopped by the granite rock. What'd yuh see through the scrub?"

"How do yuh know it was my hoss there?"

A faint grin of derision split Sheriff Joiner's lips.

"The unbranded bay in the north barn is your'n, accordin' to the barn man. Three shoes and so near each other in shape and size as to be unnatural. Left forefoot of your hoss has a good shoe likewise, but one of the inside nails is missin'. Shows up in soft dirt."

Doyle let out a sigh.

"Sheriff, rightly I dunno. I seen what looked like three riders comin' up-creek through the scrub. Then there was four. One being' held by two others, and purty

soon he fell out of his saddle to the ground."

Sheriff Joiner's eyes went almost shut. Color marked his dry brown skin.

"The Dolans found Ballinger lyin' there. And his hoss, which they brung to town. Cowboy, by rights I ought to lock yuh up to save yore hide. When them riders find out they was seen, yuh're good as dead."

"That bad, huh? Wal, I don't talk much." Doyle's eyes kindled with abrupt hope. "Maybe it would be a good idea to put me in yore barred cage."

Sheriff Joiner did not stir the slightest. His eyes opened wider and finally he grinned faintly.

"Want to get inside after Big, hunh? Go on with yuh!"

He decided to tell Melissa that he was kin, so Doyle strolled back to the Tubbs' general store. Maybe his mother's brother had returned. Only, the broad-backed man there now wasn't his uncle. He wore a low-hung gun, dirty clothes and a tattered vest. He stood against the dress goods counter holding tight to Melissa's hands. She was mad, her face almost as red as her hair.

"Turn me loose this instant, Steve Dolan!" she cried hotly. "Help!" she shrilled towards the back of the store where a middle-aged clerk appeared.

"Stay put, you!" Dolan hurled at the agitated clerk, one side of his whisker-bristled face twitching. He relaxed his attention to Melissa a trifle. When he did she got one hand free. It rose and flashed through the air, landed with a resounding slap on the side of Dolan's cheek.

Dolan jerked with surprise and sudden overpowering rage! As he felt her other hand escaping, he struck fast across the counter with his right palm. The blow wasn't hard, but it did leave momentary white marks on Melissa's cheek.

Doyle in turn saw a maddening haze. Dolan erupted in verbal violence, fuming and cursing, his excitement deadening Doyle's approach. When a hand seized the back of Dolan's gun belt, and another grabbed his neck band, lifting him clear of the floor, he fought and struggled. Being shorter than Doyle, he was easily yanked off his feet. Doyle took him with a rush through the doors to the edge of the porch, applied a boot and sent Dolan sprawling in the cut-up choking dust of the gutter.

Spectators on both sides of the street paused to stare, immediately tittering with amusement. A teamster below the store halted his jerkline teams to watch Dolan get up slowly and start to brush his clothing. Dolan faced around fully towards Doyle, his bloodshot little eyes studying him. The motion at his gun butt hesitated.

"Go ahead," Doyle encouraged. "I'm only middlin' fair."

STEVE DOLAN'S pause lengthened. Then he wheeled, went striding across the street. Doyle went inside the store to find Melissa at the lower end of the counter near the front window.

"Thanks, cowboy," she began between her teeth. "Steve Dolan has always pestered me for marrying up. Now I'm afraid for you. What you did was a blow to his vanity. Only a bullet will wipe it out. Don't think he isn't a dangerous sidewinder!"

"Bad, huh?" Doyle refused to be impressed. "Your father back yet?"

"He is in the office, I think."

"Yes'm, I—" Doyle stopped talking abruptly. Two riders had swung in before the saloon across the street. The near horse was a big red bay gelding, wearing a strange saddle, and on the left hip a DD connected had been freshly burned.

"Piute!" burst in hoarse anguish from Doyle's throat. On the instant he had wheeled, rushing out of the store. He hit the street seeing the two cowboys, up on the board walk, talking with Steve Dolan.

Doyle ran all the way over, the trio facing him fully only at the last minute. Shaking with rage, he planted his feet in the dirt.

"Which one of yuh rode the bay in?" he demanded.

"Me, and it's my hoss," declared the man in the center.

"Hyars the rannyhan, Omar," Dolan drawled, standing to one side, ready to draw. "Watch him."

The commotion collected a few men. From them stepped Sheriff Joiner. He said, "What's the ruckus about?"

"I'm goin' to kill the man who branded my hoss!" Doyle shouted. "Raised him from a colt, and never aimed to run no hot iron on him. Ever! Now this orejana

burns him and swipes him."

"That's a bare faced lie, Joiner," Omar Dolan declared. "The fact is, yesterday mornin' we missed my special mount from the ranch. Raised him from a colt, and Spike and Uncle Steve can swear to it. Was we surprised to find him stole. Some widelooper brought him right into town and put him in the north livery barn."

"Step down," Doyle ordered, calming in cold fury. "I allow to see yore blood flow—hoss-thieving rat!"

"Hold it, cowboy," Sheriff Joiner snapped testily.

"Has this here stranger got a bill of sale for the hoss?" Steve Dolan sneered. "If it's his, how come no brand? Let's show him what we do to hoss thieves around Crumtown."

"Of course I ain't got no bill of sale, not needin' one," Doyle flung at Sheriff Joiner. "If you got any doubts listen." He shifted his head and yelled, "Piute! Piute!" The big bay moved, shook itself and tried to get its head around to face Doyle. Failing, the animal nickered. To all horsemen that was proof enough of ownership.

"Now who says *who* owns that hoss?" Doyle demanded triumphantly.

The day jailor came running into the main street, panting and choking for breath. He shouted something, and came on faster, halting a dozen steps out beyond the horses tied before the saloon porch.

"Sheriff!" he gasped, paused and took another deep breath. "Short Tubbs just come in with the Dolans' cook all wrapped up. Poor feller looks like he's had a good goin' over. Short and Big tore the cell bars loose and escaped. They said to leave the cook to you!"

Silence came fast over the street. Only Sheriff Joiner kept his presence of mind.

"Go on back and guard the cook with a shot-gun until I get there," Joiner said, facing the Dolans who were suddenly ready to leave.

"What's yore hurry?" Joiner drawled. "Omar, yuh able to prove ownership of this hoss?"

While Omar hesitated, Steve Dolan did not. "Naturally we can!" he roared. "Joiner, lock up that cowboy for stealin'. We'll prove it."

"Just who owns this particular hoss is what I want to know," Sheriff Joiner replied, choosing words carefully. "This hoss was ridden into the creek scrub where Ballinger's body was found. So, I reckon, Omar, since yuh claim the hoss, yuh better start talkin'."

"What for?" Omar put in, backing up. "This joke's gone far enough for me. We was only runnin' a blazer on the stranger. Never set eyes on the bay before this mornin'. Since it does belong to him, reckon yuh got Ballinger's killer!"

First Doyle had been amazed at Sheriff Joiner's words, and then he thought he saw the officer's ruse. The Dolans were all tangled up, scared and ready to run or shoot their way out. The apprehension over the cook obviously had something to do with the Dolans' confused consternation.

DOYLE waited for the sheriff to go on, but the Dolans' unified action caught him cold. As one the three snaked for their guns. And right there came an exultant yell from behind the nearest spectators.

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, this one is mine!" exploded on the street, and plummeting through the standing men appeared Big Tubbs. His enormous arms reached and clutched Steve Dolan, jerked him high in the air and slammed him crushingly down on the board walk. On the far side, Short gathered Spike Dolan into the fold and treated him likewise.

Omar whirled around, throwing a shot at Sheriff Joiner as he leaped off the board walk to get away from that pair of redheaded hurricanes. Sheriff Joiner was hit slightly, lost his gun. Omar straightening up to the right, got off a second shot. He missed. Doyle did not. A round blue hole appeared in Omar's forehead and he sprawled down in the dirt, dead.

Sheriff Joiner felt of his right shoulder, inclined his head and picked up his gun. Meantime Short and Big continued pounding the breath out of Steve and Spike. Both were yelling for help, fearful of being killed. Short, able to reach over the edge of the walk, gathered a handful of sand which he slapped into his victim's mouth to silence him effectively.

"Lay off a mite," Sheriff Joiner ordered, coming up to make certain the remaining Dolans were disarmed. "I reckon Omar fell into my trap so he must of killed Bal-

linger. This cowboy's hoss wasn't no nearer where the body lay, than the granite rock."

Short paused to stare with smouldering eyes at Doyle.

"Correct," he said. "I gathered me in that cook. A bound man watchin' a stove lid get red hot can be persuaded easy. According to him the Dolans and Ballinger was drinkin' and playing poker until dawn night before last.

"Omar lost heavy, accused Ballinger of cheating. Steve stopped a killin' then, but yesterday mornin' after breakfast, Omar shot Ballinger through the side of the head. The Dolans moped around home all day, finally, in the afternoon, they decided to take the body up onto our creek range an' let it be found there, so's we'd be blamed with the murder.

"Rats," he broke off, "the cook's in yore office to tell yuh all about it!" He went back to pounding Spike some more.

Sheriff Joiner made him stop. He got men to tote Omar's body away and help get the two prisoners safely out of the redhead's clutches over to jail. Quite a crowd collected to watch proceedings.

Still raging, Doyle pulled off the saddle and bridle from his horse, letting them fall in the street. He slapped the bay on the shoulder.

"Go on back where yuh was fed last. I'll do something about that brand!"

The bay wheeled aside, halted, nickered and on receiving the same order went prancing off up the street throwing its head to the side in triumph. Doyle turned around, surprised to see the Tubbs brothers waiting with expectant grins, on the edge of the wooden walk.

"Some of you keep Big out of this until I get through settlin' with Short for a chair crownin'. Then I'll be obliged to whop him too!"

"So soon!" Short cried in glee, leaping towards Doyle. Doyle was there to greet him, smacked him full in the face and kicked him backwards where he fell against the saddle on the ground.

Immediately he gathered his limbs for a leap.

"Wait!" Melissa shouted. "Short, you quit that!"

Doyle gave a cautious side glance. Melissa came through the ring of spectators. With her walked a short, gray-headed man who looked at him not unkindly.

"What for, Melissa?" Short wanted to know.

"He's kin, that's what. You hear?"

"Hunh?" came from Big. "Don't believe it!"

"He is so, too. Father just got this letter from Uncle Wilcox telling about his coming for a visit."

"Kinfolks!" Short said. "Gun an' fightin' kin to boot. What do yuh know!"

"Howdy, son." Mr. Tubbs came forward to shake Doyle's hand.

"Welcome! Come along with Melissa and me to the store where we can visit. Might be best to get you out of the clutches of these two."

BIG declared grandly:

"Let's likker the meetin'."

"No!" Melissa objected positively.

"Shucks!" Short looked crestfallen, though his genial grin was back in a wink. He yelled at Big. They descended on Doyle to seize him in bear hugs from each side. They almost pressed the breath out of Doyle, until Melissa rescued him again.

"A fine way to treat a cousin who has done so much to help you boys," she chided.

Doyle felt a little bit weak. Big and Short were rough handed men even when their playful side was shown. Melissa went into the store ahead of them, with her father. Big and Short were still hanging onto Doyle, escorting him with fancy words and much slapping.

Right inside the door, in a cleared space, their open handed friendliness ended with a rush. Down went Doyle under their combined weight. Short sat on his legs. Big pulled his hair and twisted his ears.

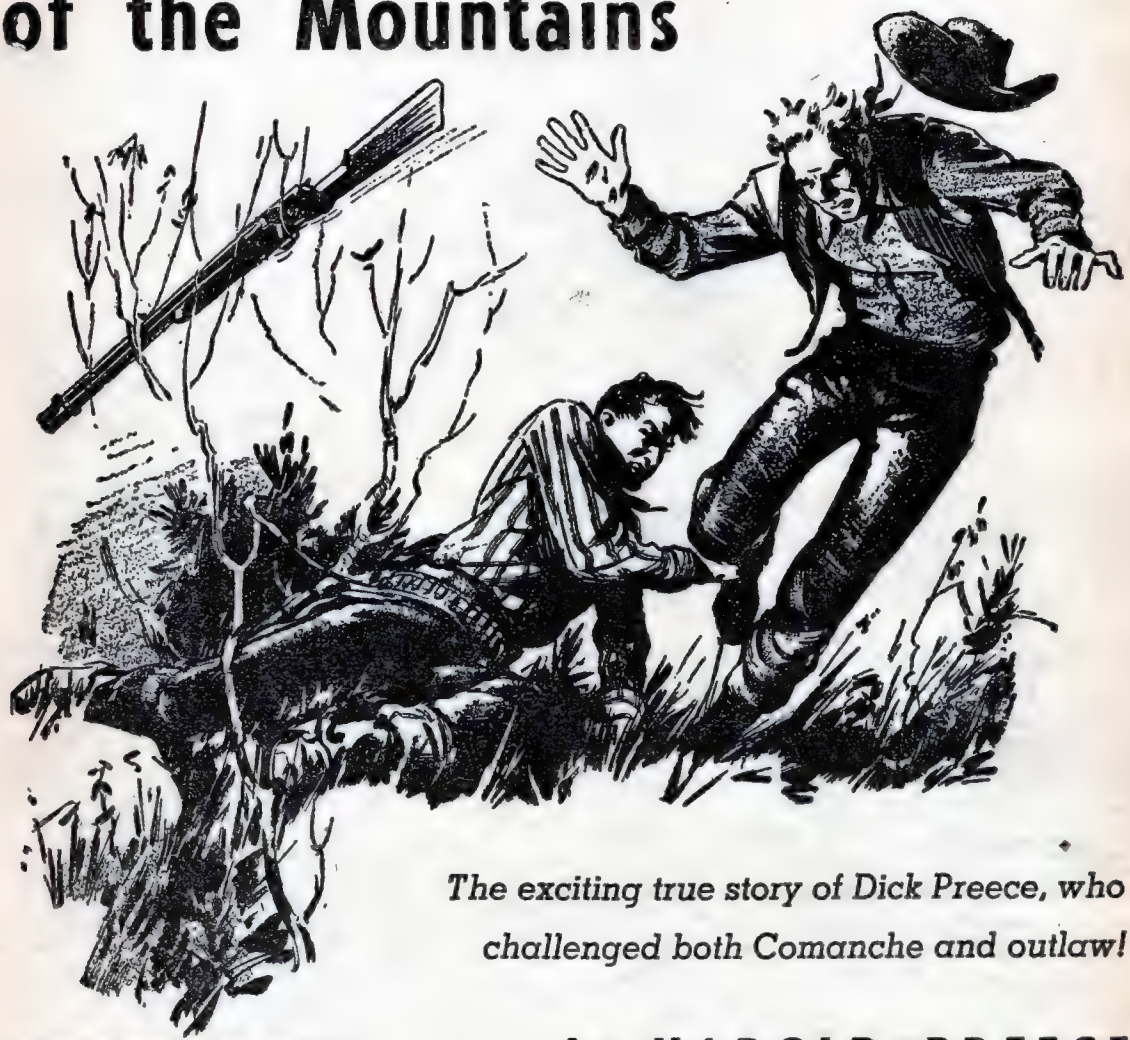
"Gotta give him proper welcome!" Big cried gaily.

Short lifted his body to reach a better spot to annoy Doyle. When he did, Doyle jerked his knees up and shot both booted feet straight into Short's middle. Short was rammed through the air, landing solid against a counter, gasping and choking painfully for air.

Big got up, laughing uproariously.

"That evens up for the chair crownin', Short," Big observed. "Now get up like a little man and shake hands with our cousin!"

EAGLE of the Mountains



The outlaw found his fooot caught in a grip of iron

The exciting true story of Dick Preece, who challenged both Comanche and outlaw!

by HAROLD PREECE

THE homesteader had been dead three days when the silent men in the big hats pulled him from the muddy waters of Jim Ned Creek. His arms and legs had been bound with heavy iron wire; a heavy iron weight had been hung around his neck to make him sink. But still his eyes stared in grim accusation. And the Ranger company knew those eyes were accusing the cut-throat pack they hunted.

Six times, that hot month of August, 1858, the Rangers had pulled dead settlers out of creeks and rivers here in the west Texas hills. Six times, Brick Banks' band of killers, which hated civilization and was determined to stamp it out in Texas, had given the slip to the lawmen.

Now, Captain John H. Connor's whole company faced discharge and disgrace unless the assassins were rounded up to be strung up.

A slight, soft-spoken lad of twenty-five was the first to break the silence as the Rangers gazed down at the sixth victim.

"Captain Connor!" The words poured in a torrent from the young Ranger's lips, "I've done a lot of wolf-huntin' in my time. And we aren't huntin' men now. We're huntin' wolves even if they run on two legs instead of four.

"I've found out you've got to be a wolf to catch wolves. You've got to prowl like a wolf—even if you're killin' on the law side. I'm goin' wolf-huntin'—and I'm goin' by myself."

John Connor forgot the bawling-out letter, received that morning from Governor Hardin Runnels when he looked into the unflinching eyes of the smallest man and the best shot in his company.

Ranger Goes Scouting

"If any man can track 'em down," he said, "it's Dick Preece who's got Daniel Boone's scouting blood in him. All right, Dick I'm writing Hard Runnels I put you on the track, and for him to cool down."

Dick Preece rode into the deep woods, wolf-scoutin', after John Connor had finished his speech. Dick's daddy, Uncle Will Preece, back in Travis County, had been a scout with the Preece kinsman, Daniel Boone, and had come into the Kentucky hills from the Virginia hills with Boone. Dick Preece, born in the Kentucky hills among the related clans of the Boones, the Lincolns, and the Preeces was carrying on the tradition here in the Texas hills.

As he pushed deeper into the wilderness looking for the tracks of two-legged wolves, Ranger Dick wasn't minding what Texas was saying about him. Already they were comparing him to Sam Houston's famous scout, Deaf Smith, and saying that Dick Preece didn't need to keep dogs because he had a keener nose than any hound in the mountains. He was tired—very tired—of seeing settlers murdered because Brick Banks' gang knew it would have no hiding places, once the creek banks and the pecan thickets became corn patches and steer pastures.

Traveling on foot, because horses leave too many telltale hoofprints, he passed the limits of the white settlements on the Salt Fork of the Brazos. He kept out of the settlements themselves because he didn't want Brick Banks' spies to know he was on the trail. He expected trouble when he got beyond the fringe of the settlements. And he wasn't long finding it.

He rounded a trail skirting the edge of Pecan Bayou in Brown County. He found himself looking into the barrels of two carbines and into the hard eyes of two rough-looking hombres.

"Head back, stranger, and head quick!" one barked. "Law stops at the bayou. There ain't any land to take up here, and there ain't any uninvited company wanted."

Dick Preece's eyes were a mild blue when he answered: "I'm not lookin' for land, nor for trouble. Just lookin' for antelope."

The hombre winked at his partner. That wink meant death. And Dick Preece knew it.

The second man touched the trigger of his carbine. But before he could pull it, the gun in the hands of the slim young stranger was saying something that no outlaws ever wanted to hear. It was the death song, sung with bullets, of the Texas Rangers.

Dick Preece's bullet ripped into the desperado, killing him.

The first outlaw had fired two shots which landed harmlessly in the bark of an oak tree. When his pardner fell dead, he dodged behind the tree and began firing at Ranger Dick, who was exposed in the open.

Bullet Hits Ranger's Hat

A bullet hit the crown of Dick's sombrero and carried the hat flying away into the bayou. Another shot took away a lock of the slick black hair Dick had inherited from his part-Cherokee mother. Bullets were spattering around him. Suddenly, the Ranger tumbled to the ground.

With a gloating look in his eyes, the outlaw came from behind the tree. He smacked his lips in satisfaction as he looked down at the limp form of the

Ranger. Then he touched it carelessly with his foot.

He found the foot caught in a grip of iron. The next minute, he was writhing furiously on the ground, his arms pinioned by strong young hands, his gun lying a dozen feet away. And he shrieked when his eyes saw the look in the face of the man he thought was dead.

"Don't feel too bad, hombre," the young fellow was saying. "It's a trick that's been passed down in my family as a kind of a secret. My daddy got it from Daniel Boone and I got it from my daddy."

"Dick—Dick Preece!" the outlaw panted. "Now I know who you are." The big fellow blubbered. "I didn't have any part in killin' all those folks back there in the settlements. Don't kill me."

"I thought you were a wolf and you're nothin' but a cowardly coyote! I'm lettin' you up. But I'm holdin' my gun on you while you wade in that water and get me my hat. Then we're takin' a little trip together—you and me—to see Mr. Brick Banks."

The outlaw was shaking with fright as he waded into the water and picked up the hat. He waded out, facing Dick's gun, facing the rope because law had walked into another part of the Lone Star State when a Texas Ranger had walked in.

"Now, let's get goin', coyote," Dick growled. "Don't want to know your real name yet—this one is good enough for this trip. But you try leadin' me down a blind trail and you'll be grub for the coyotes."

Wisps of horses' hair sticking from cedar trees, a piece of a broken spur, the remains of a camp fire, told the Ranger that the scared coyote was leading him right. They traveled all day and until after sundown. The young ranger's arm became stiff and tired from holding it in a steady aim on coyote walking ahead. But not once did it relax its grip. Not once did he let the outlaw know that he was hungry and footsore and sleepy. Never let your foes see any sign of weakness—that was Dick's motto and he lived up to it.

Ranger Captures Outlaws

The stars were out when they came to the top of a little hill. Below, a fire was burning, horses were whinnying, men were talking. Dick's keen ears caught their words in the still Texas night.

"We cleaned out the settlers," a voice was rumblin. "Tomorrow we saddle up to clean out the Rangers."

Dick turned to his prisoner. "Must be Brick Banks blowin' off. But I'm cleanin' out that whole pack. We're goin' down there. And you're going to introduce me as a pardner of yours."

A few minutes later, the big-shouldered outlaw chief and the slight young mountain man were sizing up each other in the light of the campfire.

"Name's Bob Tucker," Dick drawled. "Had a little brush with a posse over in Bosque County, then headed west to look up my old friend here." He jerked a thumb toward the man he had captured.

"You can throw in with us," Banks said. "Help yourself to grub from the skillet."

Dick moved toward the skillet. He noticed that there were three other men in camp besides himself, his prisoner, and Banks. The men were relaxed. They had stowed the guns and cartridge belts, in careless confidence, under a tree. But his own pistol was itching at its holster when he looked over the wolf pack.

He picked up the skillet. Banks' face was turned toward him.

The skillet went flying from the Ranger's hands with the speed of a bullet. The outlaw chief howled from the pain of burning grease. And as his followers leaped to their feet, Dick Preece's gun was turned on them.

"Surrender, you bunch of bushwhackers," he howled. "Surrender to the Texas Rangers!"

His eyes roved over the outlaws. How would Daniel Boone have solved this one? To capture half-a-dozen men single-handed was one thing. To bring them back under arrest, a hundred miles away, with no help, was another.

He was still wondering half-an-hour later when he heard the sound of galloping hoofs. He herded his captives into a corral. He took up a post with his gun on the corral fence, sitting there and waiting to shoot it out with more outlaws.

But the faces of the three men who rode into the outlaw camp were not wolf faces. They were the faces of comrades—Texas

Rangers like himself.

They pulled up their horses short and whistled when they saw Dick with his man-haul. "Well, don't stand there with your eyes a-poppin'," bawled Dick Preece. "Give me a hand with these varmints."

"Figured you might need some help, Dick," a Ranger answered. "So we took out after you."

Dick "borrowed" one of the outlaw's horses for the long ride back to Jim Ned Creek. He knew that the power of these bandits in the Texas hills had been broken. Now the new counties, carved out by the Texas legislature, would be filled up with new settlers.

Only when he delivered his catch to Captain Connor did he ask Coyote's true name. It was Rance Carter. And it was as Rance Carter that the desperado swung from the gallows with Banks and the other outlaws, three months later.

"Dick," Captain Connor told him, "you've not only performed one of the greatest single-handed exploits in the whole history of the Texas Rangers, but you've saved the reputation of our company. And, now, we got another cleaning-out job to do—on Comanches."

The Comanches Are Subdued

Dick Preece knew the Comanches from their raids into the Travis County hills. He'd been in a party which trailed and slew a war band of the red trailers when he was fourteen. So captain Connor sent him ahead of the ranger company to locate the camp of the red raiders who were terrorizing West Texas.

He rode for two days and ran into a Comanche scout. They met in a deep ravine. They eyed each other briefly for a minute. The Comanche drew a tomahawk. It flew low, close to Dick's horse. The horse reared in fright. Holding the horse's bridle with one hand, grabbing for his Colt with the other, Dick felt the sting of an arrow across his cheek. But the next minute that Comanche lay dying in a patch of ferns. The Ranger's bullet had hit him between the eyes.

A mile away, he sighted the Comanche encampment on a little knoll. He rode swiftly back to the Ranger camp. That night, the Texans struck.

They rode like demons into the sleeping Comanche camp. Dick's singing lead took care of two sentries whose throats were rattling with death before they could give the alarm. The Texans knocked down wigwams and shot surprised warriors jumping to their feet. They captured the chief and bound him with lassos. Then in the woods, Dick heard a child crying. He galloped toward the sound.

A Comanche baby was crawling around the body of its dead mother. An arrow was bedded deep in the woman's chest. She'd been accidentally killed by one of her own people during the battle.

Dick picked up the baby. He placed it on his saddle and held it with one arm. The infant stopped yowling and cuddled up to him. He was grinning sheepishly as he placed it beside him on his blankets, that night.

"This here's my prisoner," he told his comrades. "He's the chummiest little prisoner any Ranger ever caught."

He headed toward his own hills in Travis County with it. Pioneer women gave him milk and diapers along the way. When he hit Travis County, he rode to the camp of the Tonkawa Indians, firm allies of the settlers and bitter enemies of the Comanches.

He roused up the Tonkawa chief known as Jim White. "Jim, do you want to see one good Comanche?" he asked.

The chief scowled at the baby. "Tonks no wants see Comanches—big or little. Dick Preece great warrior. But Dick Preece no make Tonks take Comanche papoose."

"Jim," answered Dick Preece. "You're going to raise this Comanche young 'un. You're going to raise him never to know he's a Comanche. I'll be back every so often to see how you raise him."

The Ranger was faithful to his word. The little Comanche grew up an adopted Tonkawa, never knowing he wasn't a real one. When the Tonkawas moved from Texas to Indian Territory, he went with them.

Dick Preece had been furloughed to find a home for the Indian babe. When he rode down to Austin to report for duty, he got a shock. The legislature had failed to appropriate money for more than a skeleton force of rangers. Certain com-

panies had been abolished altogether, and Captain Connor's was one of them.

With a heavy heart, Dick Preece turned in his ranger star. He put away his citations for bravery. He thought he was through following a flag and a gun after those two years of hard riding and hard shooting. And Uncle Will Preece needed him to run their ranch on Bull Creek.

But a far-away kinsman of his was deciding differently for him.

That kinsman was his third cousin, Abe Lincoln. Cousin Abe became president in 1861, and Texas seceded from the Union. But Bull Creek seceded from the Confederacy. Ex-Ranger Richard Lincoln Preece was the one who raised the flag of the Union under the very shadow of the Confederate state capitol.

A Guerilla Outfit

He rounded up other Kentucky and Tennessee hillmen who had drifted down with the Preeces to the Texas hills. He helped organize that first outfit of Southern Union guerillas—the Texas Mountain Eagles. He refused to be more than a noncom in the outfit, but he was automatically its chief scout. He spotted the Confederate recruiting detachments moving into the hills. Time after time those detachments were hurled back by the Mountain Eagles, swarming out in furious surprise attacks from the canyons and cedar brakes.

Other ex-rangers rode and shot for the Union with Dick Preece. For the rangers split during the Civil War—some to ride with the Blue, some to ride with the Gray. Those who wore the Blue dreamed with Dick Preece of capturing the Confederate capital in Austin, a tantalizing ten miles from Bull Creek, and of seizing the state government and bringing Texas back into the Union.

The Confederate government in Richmond got wind of the plan. It rushed a crack division under General E. Kirby Smith to put down the Unionists of West Texas. Too smart to engage these well-armed gray clad soldiers in open battle, the poorly-armed Mountain Eagles made a masterly retreat over seven hundred miles of mountain and cactus to the Mexican border. Then they sailed to New Orleans, held by the Union forces.

There General N. P. Banks swore them in as the First Texas Cavalry of the U. S. Army. Afterwards, Abe Lincoln turned his kinsman, Dick Preece, and the other Union Texans loose against the Confederate Texans in the crucial battle for Northern Louisiana. Texan shot at Texan in the bloodiest battles ever waged between Texans—with one bunch carrying the Lone Star Flag side by side with the Stars and Stripes and the other carrying it side by side with the Stars and Bars. But each side made it a point to bury dead enemy Texans, found on the battlefield, under the Lone Star flag.

"You'd think it was a private war between Texans," grumbled General Banks. "Texas shot its way out of Mexico, then shot its way out of the United States. Whichever way Texas turns, there'll be shooting."

Dick Preece was with the Texan Unionists when they pushed the Confederate Texans across the Sabine River. Then both sides were on their home ground of Texas. By that time, he was rated as one of the crack shots of the Union Army as he had been one of the crack shots of the Texas Rangers. He had no buttons for his ragged blue coat. But he had fifteen sharpshooter medals to pin it up.

It was a hot day in 1863 when he and a Confederate Texans drew a bead on each other in Panola County, Texas, just over the Sabine from Louisiana. The two spotted each other from opposite bluffs overlooking a dim country road. It looked like a double killing as each took careful aim.

All Texan!

Just then, a little girl came skipping down the road. Each Texan quickly put down his gun. When she'd passed on, the man in gray called out to the man in blue.

"That kid's daddy is wearin' your color. Her uncle is wearin' mine. What does that make her?"

"Makes her all Texan," yelled back Dick Preece. "Let's drop guns and say howdy."

They met in the middle of the road and smoked a pipe together. The man in gray said his name was Morris Moore.

As they rode through the South, the Texans in blue were joined by other

Dixie Unionists. In Arkansas, they picked up a Missouri Irishman named Mark Shannon. One night around the campfire, Sergeant Shannon showed Sergeant Preece a picture of his pretty sister.

"Her name's Kate," Mark said. "She cussed out Quantrell right to his face once when he came raidin' near a house where she was visitin'."

Dick looked for a long time at the picture of that dashing Irish girl who'd dared the fierce Confederate guerilla chief to tear down the Union flag flying from that house. For good measure, Mark added, she'd told off a couple of hard-shooting young fellows who rode with Quantrell. The pair called themselves Frank and Jesse James.

"Awful pretty girl, Mark," Dick sighed as he handed back the picture. "I'd sure like to meet her when this is all over."

"Blast your hide, Dick, why don't you drop her a line? She'd be right proud to hear from a cousin of Old Abe."

The Gray yielded to the Blue. The Shannons, perked up by Dick's bragging letters about Texas, moved to the Lone Star State. Dick met the pretty Irish girl. She became his wife. And they became my grandparents.

Right after his marriage, Dick found out he had a new neighbor. The neighbor was Morris Moore who'd bought a ranch nearby. The two had a good laugh over what had happened back there on that road. Later, Morris Moore became a ranger lieutenant. Afterwards he was a Travis County deputy sheriff who got badly wounded in the great battle with Sam Bass' gang at Round Rock.

Dick Preece raised twelve children, and a thousand times that many steers and horses. He kept open house for every man—ex-partisan of Abe Lincoln or ex-soldier of Jeff Davis—who knocked on his door. When he was on his dying bed in 1906, an old neighbor who had worn the Gray nursed him through his last hours.

"Dick Preece fought on a different side from most of us," said Governor Sam Lanham, an ex-Confederate soldier, after the old fighter had passed on. "But he was one of Texas' great scouts and one of its great rangers. I reckon Uncle Dick stretched the Boone Trail clear to Texas."

"You Can't Buck the Lobo Legion!"

SHERIFF Buck Drago of Wagontrack looked at Jim Hatfield keenly and asked: "Where'd you leave your Ranger company, Jim?"

Hatfield glanced up, a humorous twinkle in his eye. "What company?"

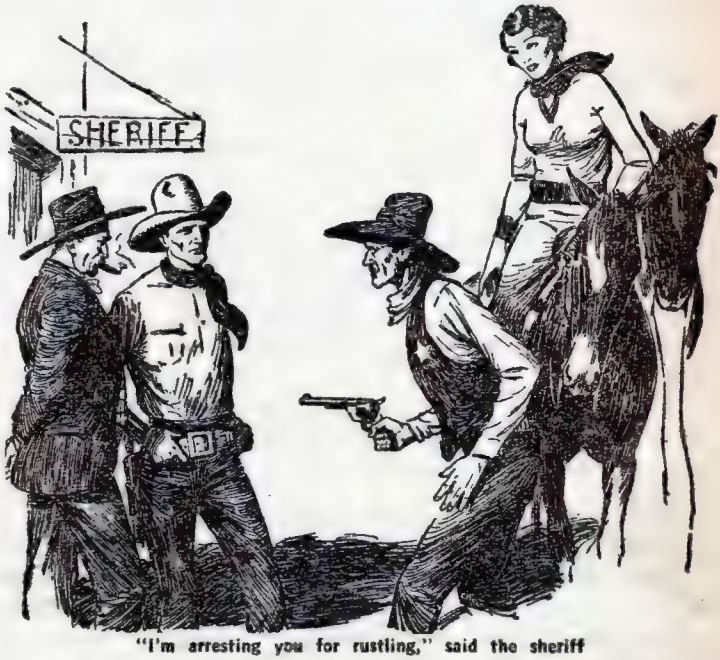
Drago's jaw dropped. "You mean you came up here *alone!* Dang it, I asked for a whole company! You buck the Lobo Legion alone, Jim, and you're committin' suicide!"

But Hatfield took the chance—in THE LOBO LEGION, by Jackson Cole—and met a thunderous challenge with the lightning of his six-guns! Follow Hatfield as he combats marauding killers who imperil the great herds of Texas—in THE LOBO LEGION, a smashing novel of roaring guns, range war and rustlers! It's in the next issue—look forward to it!

The Meanest Sheriff

by
DONALD HOBART

Deputy Wilbur Brickett brings home the bacon when his fat's in the fire!



"I'm arresting you for rustling," said the sheriff

WHY I ever took a job as Sheriff Lem Crabtree's deputy is one of those things a feller couldn't explain in a month of Sundays. The sheriff is a tall, skinny jigger with a little black mustache and an expression on his face like he had been eating too many sour apples. If you ask me, Lem Crabtree just can't be happy unless he is sure the rest of the world is plumb miserable.

He keeps picking on me all of the time like I was a mandolin. It is my job to open up the sheriff's office at six A.M. every morning. Since the building is on the southeast side of the one and only street in the thriving little cowtown known as Beaver Flats, the office gets a little dusty at times.

I'm supposed to sweep out the office, dust off the furniture, wind up the old clock on the sheriff's desk, feed the prisoners—if we have any in the jail in the rear of the building—and view with alarm any folks who come looking for the Law before the sheriff honors us with his presence around ten o'clock.

The morning the trouble started there was a nice breeze blowing outside, so every time I swept the dust out the front door it blew right in again. Wasn't the first time that had happened either, and a thing like that can lead to short tempers and stubby brooms.

Good thing there wasn't anybody in the jail, for all I needed to make me right short tempered was to have some prisoners bite the hand that feeds them by making funny remarks about the fat man who was their jailor. Besides I've been reducing lately. Only eat three meals a day, and I weigh just a couple of ounces over a stylish two hundred and forty pounds.

I WAS just starting to sweep out the office for the fifth time when Sheriff Crabtree arrived—an hour earlier than usual and started right in convincing me that the early bird acts like a worm.

"I thought so, Wilbur Birkett," he said. "Loafing on the job as usual. This place should have been swept out hours ago."

"The wind—" I began.

"That's what you are, a big bag of wind," interrupted the sheriff, who talks, but never listens. "Here I am workin'

myself to death day in and day out, and you never give me a bit of help—not even just a little."

Since the top of his desk is near wore out from him resting his feet on it all day long, the pitiful story of his toil and struggle doesn't tempt me to break down and cry. All the same I decided I had better start serving my soothing syrup for petulant lawmen.

"I was talkin' to Colonel Rutherford last night—" I said.

"There you go, standing around chinnin' when you should be doin' yore work," interrupted Crabtree, before he more than half heard what I said. Then he slowed down. "The colonel, eh? What did he say?"

"That in ten years of livin' in Mesquite County and in Beaver Flats you are the best sheriff they've ever had," I said.

When I had seen Colonel Rutherford in the Palace Saloon the previous night all he had said to me was, "Good evening, Wilbur." But I discovered long ago that flattery rubbed the sheriff the right way.

"He did, eh?" said the sheriff. "About time folks around here showed some appreciation of my work." He watched me sweeping out the dust and the wind blowing it right back again. "You better give that up for now, Wilbur. You'll never get the place clean until the wind dies down."

I breathed a sigh of relief and put the broom away. I wasn't too fond of my job, but the pay was good and I didn't want to lose it. Besides a man has to eat and there wasn't any other work I could get in that part of the country. Last time I tried to get a job as a cowboy I had taken on a little weight. The ranch owner just looked me over and shook his head sadly.

"I'm sorry, Birkett," he said. "But I can't take you on. I got to think of my horses, you'd have them worn down to a nub in a week."

Since I only weighed two hundred and seventy-five pounds at the time, I resented his little speech, but I knew there was no use arguing about it. I just didn't try for any more ranch jobs. Of course, like I said before, I've been reducing lately and only weigh two hundred and forty now.

By the time I put the broom away the sheriff was sitting in his chair with his feet propped up on the desk. He looked at me with what would have been a smile on anyone else's face, but on Crabtree's you just didn't believe it.

"I've been thinking over what the colonel told you," said the sheriff. "What we need is a murder or a bank robbery around here, so I can get right to work and convince folks that they have the smartest and bravest sheriff in Arizona."

I sank gingerly into a chair, in the cautious way a heavy man always treats furniture. In Lem Crabtree's estimation the sheriff sure was a man to admire, and though it might have been the heat, I felt a little sea-sick.

Before I could say anything, Hank Foster, who owns the Double Diamond outfit, came storming into the office. Folks say that Foster is a cattleman of the old school, but it is my private opinion he never got past the first grade. If you ask me he is all bluff and bluster, and how he ever happened to have a daughter as sweet and pretty as Clementine sure is a reason for wondering.

"I've been losing more stock, including my brindle bull, and I want him arrested at once!" shouted Foster, waving his arms around like a windmill. "Don't just sit there—do something!"

The sheriff went into fast action by lowering his feet to the floor. "Just why should you want yore brindle bull arrested if he has been stolen?" Crabtree asked. "Maybe you had better calm down, Foster."

"I don't mean the bull, I mean Jerry Martin," said Foster, who was still excited, but waving his arms in slow motion now. "He's missing, and he's guilty."

THE sheriff looked at me in surprise. We knew Jerry Martin. He was a nice young cowboy who had started his own ranch five miles south of the Double Diamond two years ago. He seemed to be doing all right with his Walking M. A lot of folks were saying that he was in love with Clementine Foster, and that she thought Jerry was right nice to have around.

"I didn't know Jerry Martin was missing," said the sheriff. "When did he disappear, Foster?"

"He ain't missing—some stock and my brindle bull is gone," said Foster. "I'm

accusing Jerry Martin of doing the stealing."

"That's a right serious charge, Mr. Foster," I said. "Have you any proof?"

"My deputy took the words right out of my mouth," said the sheriff, just as though it wasn't something he hadn't thought of until then. "You can't expect me to arrest Martin for rustling without proof, pardner."

"Maybe not," said Foster. "But I expect the Law to find that proof, and get back my missing stock. If this keeps up it will cost me thousands."

"Sounds serious," said the sheriff. "How much stock is missing?"

"The brindle bull and five or six calves," said Foster looking a bit shame-faced.

Since there was usually nearly a thousand head of cattle carrying the Double Diamond brand in a good year, Hank Foster's loss of stock sure sounded right tragic.

"All that stock missing," I said dryly, and what with the heat of the day I was feeling even dryer. "Sounds serious, all right, Mr. Foster."

"That brindle bull cost me a lot of money," the rancher said. "And I still claim that Jerry Martin stole him."

"What for?" asked the sheriff. "Martin has a ranch of his own and a fair number of beefs. Why should he steal yore cattle, Foster?"

"For revenge," said the owner of the Double Diamond. "Why that young upstart actually had the nerve to ask me if he could marry my daughter, Clementine. I ordered him off the place and told him never to come back. He seemed mighty mad about it." The rancher tugged at his goatee. "He called me an old goat."

"You ain't so young anymore," I said softly. "Might be that yore daughter is really in love with Jerry Martin."

"Nonsense!" snorted Foster. "She's only twenty-one and too young to know her own mind. I'll tell her who to fall in love with when I get around to it. I expect Clementine to marry a more mature man with brains and position."

"Poor Clementine," I said, and to my surprise the sheriff looked like he agreed with me.

"Never mind all this talk!" said Foster impatiently. "I demand that you ride out to Martin's ranch and search the place for the brindle bull and the rest of my stock right away."

"All right," said the sheriff. "We'll go." He looked out at the hot sun beating down on the dusty street. The breeze had died away and the morning was a scorcher. Crabtree sighed. "Saddle the horses, Wilbur."

I went to the corral behind the jail and saddled the sheriff's bay and my big roan. When I rode into the street in front of the office on the roan, leading the sheriff's horse, I saw that Hank Foster had walked on up the street and was standing in front of the saloon talking to Colonel John Rutherford.

The colonel was a tall, husky man with a droopy gray mustache. A cigar always decorated his face. The way he told it, he practically owned the state of Texas. I wondered why he didn't go home and take care of all those properties he was always telling us about, but John Rutherford lived at the Beaver Flats Hotel. Since he had been there ever since the hotel was built he sure was what could be called a permanent guest.

With the sheriff sitting in the saddle proud as Punch and twice as ugly we rode out of town. Half an hour later we reached the Walking M. Jerry Martin wasn't anywhere around. One of his cowboys told us his boss had gone on the range early that morning and from there he planned to ride into town.

"We're here on official business," said the sheriff, giving the Walking M waddy a suspicious glance—which just happened to be Crabtree's natural expression. "We'll take a look around."

I HAD an uneasy feeling soon as we started looking around. At first we didn't run across anything suspicious—and then in a stall in the barn we found a brindle bull. He was still wearing the Double Diamond.

"So Foster was right," said the sheriff, who always was one to make a running jump at a conclusion. "Don't say anything about this, Wilbur. We're goin' back to town and arrest Jerry Martin for rustling."

"And for lack of common sense," I said as we swung into our saddles. "Anybody who would leave a stolen bull around where it was that easy to find, would push

baby ducks in the water."

We headed back to town in silence. When we were half way there the sheriff looked at me with a puzzled frown.

"What's wrong with pushing baby ducks in the water?" he asked.

"How do I know," I said, watching a rider who had just turned into the road ahead of us. "Ask the ducks. Here comes Clementine Foster."

Clementine saw us, halted her horse and waited until we reached her. She was a pretty, dark haired girl wearing a riding outfit. Soon as she smiled at him the sheriff bloomed like a cactus and was just as pretty as some of them I've seen.

"Hello, Sheriff," Clementine said. "Hello, Wilbur. I see you're heading for town. Hope you don't mind if I ride along with you."

"The pleasure is all ours," said the sheriff.

We rode on, and the way Clementine chattered I got the idea she was right excited about something, but didn't intend to tell us about it. I just waited, figuring that like most girls, she would find it no fun having a secret unless she could tell it to someone.

"I'm going to be married," she said finally. "It is still a secret, so don't tell anyone. I'm meeting him in Beaver Flats and we are going to get married this afternoon."

"Who's the lucky man?" asked the sheriff.

"That's part of the secret," said Clementine with a smile.

We reached the town and rode along the street. I saw Jerry Martin standing near the sheriff's office talking to the colonel. Crabtree saw them, too. He looked at me and frowned.

"There may be danger in making this arrest, Wilbur," he said, like he was just about to go into a cage with five lions and six tigers. "I'll take care of this alone."

The sheriff dismounted and dropped the reins of the bay so the horse stood ground-hitched close to Clementine's mare. I moved a little distance away and swung out of the saddle. Clementine sat on her horse watching us both like she thought we had suddenly gone crazy.

Crabtree looked at the doors and windows on either side of the street as though he expected men hidden there to start blasting him down at any moment. He drew his gun and advanced toward Martin and the colonel. He walked in a half crouch, as though he was facing at least four dangerous gunmen who would fire at him from all sides.

"What's the matter, Sheriff?" asked Martin, standing there calmly, his hands on his belt. "Something bothering you?"

"Don't reach for yore gun," snarled the sheriff. "You'll never live to draw it, Martin. I'm arresting you for rustling."

As she listened Clementine gasped and Jerry Martin frowned. I saw Hank Foster come out of the saloon and hurry down toward the sheriff's office. I left my horse at a hitch rail and started over to join the others standing in the street.

"Rustling," said Martin with a frown. "What are you talkin' about, Sheriff?"

"Don't try to bluff yore way out of this, Martin," said the sheriff. "I know you stole Foster's stock for revenge when he told you that you couldn't marry Clementine and ordered you off the Double Diamond."

"Which was very foolish of you, Jerry," said the colonel in a kindly tone. "Stealing Foster's prize bull and hiding it in yore barn was a big mistake."

Foster had come up and was silently listening. Martin reached back with his right hand as though he was going for his gun. The sheriff uttered a wild yell, dropped his Colt, then ran into the office and slammed the door. Martin drew a handkerchief out of his back pocket and wiped his face with it.

"Hiding Foster's brindle bull in Martin's barn was a big mistake, all right," I said. "But Jerry didn't make it. You did, Colonel Rutherford. Nobody said anything about the bull being there until you mentioned it, so you must have put it there."

COLONEL RUTHERFORD made the big mistake of going for a gun, so I shot him in the arm. He admitted that he had stolen the bull and put it in the Walking M barn in an effort to frame Jerry Martin. The colonel knew that Jerry and Clementine were in love, but he figured on marrying the girl himself. He was sure Foster would approve, if Jerry Martin was out of the way.

"Jerry and I are going to be married

(Concluded on page 90)

Being arrested by Marshal Fry wasn't on Littlejohn's program— and he wouldn't change his plans!

"Just hold that pose, Sammy," a harsh voice barked

LONG SAM Carries the Mail

By LEE BOND

A FAINT grin touched "Long Sam" Littlejohn's lips when he heard the stage coming. He flipped a cigarette butt into the dead ashes of his breakfast fire, then stood up. He was a gaunt, unusually tall man, dressed in solid black from boots to flat-crowned Stetson. He absently touched the black grips of matched six-shooters that rode black holsters low on his bony thighs.

"That Comanche Ford stage sure got an early start out of Division," he mused.

He stood with yellow-thatched head canted, smoky eyes thoughtful as he listened to the stage come tearing down the road. He glanced towards Sleeper, his ugly old roan horse.

"No whinnyin', you old sinner!" Long Sam ordered.

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, Long Sam knew better than to let the stage guard and driver catch sight of him. Even if they had never laid eyes on him there was a good chance they would know him on sight, for Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin, kept these Texas hills plastered with big "Wanted" posters, bearing Long Sam's name and description.

The coach was close now. Long Sam frowned. It was a good five miles back to Division, from which point the Comanche Ford stage had begun its daily run.

"That fool driver must be drunk!" Long Sam growled. "He'll run those teams into the ground long before he gets to Halfway Hill. Blazes!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a startled grunt. From somewhere up on that ridge came the sound of shod hoofs.

"Two or three riders, and they're comin' right down into this pocket!" the outlaw groaned.

A moment later, Long Sam saw the horses. A runty, spiked-nosed man was leading the two riderless horses behind his own mount, and traveling at a reckless pace.

"Wilk Dawson, by thunder!" Long Sam exclaimed.

Long Sam fidgeted uneasily. Wilk Dawson was one of a trio of tough hombres who used this section of Texas as a stamping grounds. Big, red-headed Bob Harlan and stocky, sullen-tempered Dirk Morgan, Wilk Dawson's running mates, would not be far away, Long Sam judged.

But staying here almost certainly meant trouble, too.

SIX months before, Long Sam had run into trouble with Wilk Dawson, Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan, sneaking a bunch of fine horses toward the Rio Grande.

Calmly, Long Sam lifted bony hands, crossed them atop the saddle horn before him. Behind him, the gaunt outlaw heard the stage go tearing past the mouth of this pocket, the horses running hard.

"What's the big rush, Wilk?" Long Sam called.

"Littlejohn!" Dawson's voice was a thin screech.

What that scrawny little gun-slinger did was certainly the last thing Long Sam would have expected him to do. Instead of flying into a rage, stark terror seemed to hit Wilk Dawson. His pinched features turned chalk white, and suddenly he neck-reined the big roan gelding he was riding. Wilk Dawson's right hand pawed down for a gun as the roan whirled and plunged. Then the roan hit the end of the lead ropes fastened to those other two horses, and was flung off its feet in a smashing fall.

"Jumpin' Judas!" Long Sam yelped.

The roan horse came lunging up, whinnying in terror. The saddle girth had parted. The roan pranced away from Wilk Dawson, who lay face down. The other two horses shied away from the saddle that slid towards them on the lead ropes that ran from their necks to the saddle horn.

"Ho, boys!" Long Sam soothed.

Talking quietly to the saddled horses, Long Sam eased up to them. He unlooped bridle reins from the saddles on their backs, let the reins dangle down to the ground. Then he pulled a knife from his pocket and cut the lead ropes from their necks. The horses quieted promptly. Long Sam tossed the ropes down beside the saddle to which they had been tied.

"What in blazes!" the gaunt outlaw exclaimed.

He was staring down at the saddle Wilk Dawson had been riding. The outlaw's eyes were on a couple of stout canvas sacks that were lashed behind the saddle's cantle.

"Mail bags!" Long Sam said.

He shot a look at Wilk Dawson who still lay just as he had been when the roan got up. Long Sam squatted on his heels. A moment later he had two mail bags spread out on the ground, examining them rapidly.

"Registered mail," Long Sam muttered. "The locks haven't been bothered, and the sacks haven't been slit."

The gaunt outlaw came to his feet, hefting the two bags. Neither bag con-

tained very much. Long Sam strode to where Wilk Dawson still lay. A wet stain had spread around Wilk Dawson's head.

"Blood!" Long Sam said, and squatted.

"Just hold that pose, Sammy!" a harsh voice barked.

Shock, and a kind of helpless anger, hit Long Sam hard. He had recognized the rough-toned voice of Joe Fry the moment the deputy marshal spoke.

"All right, Fry," the gaunt outlaw said grimly. "You've sure caught me flat-footed."

Joe Fry was directly behind him somewhere, and Long Sam was afraid to even turn his head. He remained bitterly silent, listening to the deputy's cautious steps draw closer.

"Steady, you whelp!" Fry gritted suddenly. "Push them hands as high as they'll go!"

Long Sam slowly raised his hands. He let the mail sacks fall. He heard Fry ease up behind him, then felt his holsters emptied in two quick jerks.

"How'd you happen to show up here, runt?" he asked, turning.

Joe Fry's face reddened. Hard lights kindled in his steel gray eyes, and his teeth came down hard on a frayed cigar stub that jutted from one corner of his wide, thin mouth. Fry wore a black derby hat, neatly tailored brown suit and button shoes. He was short and stocky.

"How I happened to show up here doesn't matter," the marshal growled. "I've nabbed you with the loot you and your pals took off the stage a while ago, is enough."

LONG SAM forced himself to speak calmly as he explained what had happened. But the rage in him was mounting. Joe Fry was openly sneering.

"So there's the deal, Joe," Long Sam finished. "Where and when was the stage held up?"

"What did you gun down Wilk Dawson for?" Fry countered.

"Sniff my guns, and you'll find out they haven't been fired recently!" Long Sam snapped. "Then examine Wilk Dawson's body, and you'll see that he was crushed to death when his hoss fell on him."

Fry scowled. He holstered his pistol, pulled Long Sam's guns from the waistband of his pants, sniffing the muzzles. The deputy muttered something under his breath, then circled around to squat beside Wilk Dawson. Fry rolled the body over, glancing at the pinched, blood-smeared face. He jerked Dawson's shirt open to the belt, muttering when he found no bullet wounds.

"Looks like his horse did fall on him, at that," Fry snorted. "But you didn't tell the straight of it, Littlejohn. You and Dawson were foggin' down through here with these two spare horses, when Dawson's horse fell with him."

"Joe, listen to me!" Long Sam said urgently. "Wilk Dawson, there, ran around with Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan. I'd bet Dawson was on his way to meet Harlan and Morgan somewhere."

"Where would this Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan be waitin' for Dawson, and how did they get there without horses?" Fry sneered.

"Until I found those two mail sacks on Dawson's saddle, I had a hunch Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan might be hid along the road somewhere, aimin' to hold up the stage," Long Sam answered.

"A while ago, you said you heard the stage go past here!" Fry hooted.

"The stage went past." Long Sam nodded. "I've got a hunch that stage won't go too far. Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan must have been on that stage, forcin' the guard and driver to keep on travelin'."

"Now if that ain't a brain storm!" Fry snarled. "After robbin' the stage, two of the bandits crawled aboard for a ride!"

"I'm only tryin' to figure this deal out!" Long Sam snapped. "But let's do a little ridin', Joe. About a mile south of here, old Ned Cook's Boxed C ranch stands right close to the road. Ned or some of his cowhands would be bound to see the stage if it passed there, so—good grief! Joe, there's the answer!" Long Sam went on. "I knew that stage was travelin' too blamed fast when it passed here. Dawson, Harlan and Morgan held up that stage this morning, somewhere between here and Division! Even if they killed the guard and driver, they wouldn't dare just leave the stage there."

"Why not?" Fry grunted.

"Too much chance of old Ned Cook or some of his cowhands poking up this way to see what was wrong when the stage failed to pass the Boxed C ranch on time,"

Long Sam declared. "The bandits would want a long start. So Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan stayed aboard the stage, and won't quit the stage until they're past the Boxed C ranch. Joe, sniff that Wilk Dawson's six-shooter. See if it has been fired recently."

FRY was still squatting beside the corpse. He plucked a pistol from a holster on Dawson's belt, and sniffed the muzzle. The deputy grinned, put the pistol back in Dawson's holster, stood up, and leveled his own gun at Long Sam's gaunt middle.

"Thanks for the confession, noose-bait!" Fry said.

"Confession?" Long Sam echoed blankly.

"That's right." Fry leered at him. "Oh, you didn't mean to confess, I know. You were smart enough to let your three pals do the shootin'. When I nabbed you with the loot, you thought you saw a way to weasel yourself out."

"What are you talkin' about?" Long Sam asked.

"I rode down from Division this mornin'," Fry replied. "I found the spot where you bandits looted the stage. The blood on the ground tipped me off. From the amount of blood, I'd say the guard and driver were both killed outright! I came on down the road, thinkin' the stage teams must have run away after the holdup. I was passin' the mouth of this brushy pocket when I heard a man yell. That was Wilk Dawson yellin' when his horse spilled with him."

"No doubt!" Long Sam said. "But let's get movin', Joe. If we hurry, we'll catch Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan down the road somewhere, waitin' for Wilk Dawson."

"I'm not fool enough to let you lead me into a trap so your pals can shoot me down!" Fry hooted. "The mail sacks haven't been tampered with, I see. So the thirty thousand dollars cash money in these bags is safe."

"Thirty thousand?" Long Sam repeated. "What makes you think there's thirty thousand dollars cash in those bags, Joe?"

"Bah!" Fry said harshly. "You know that there's goin' to be a run on Dan Colby's bank at Comanche Ford tomorrow mornin'. Naturally Colby sent out for cash."

"What's the matter with Dan Colby's bank?" Long Sam asked sharply.

He had known the gaunt, white-haired old banker for a number of years. Dan Colby was shrewd, honest, and rigidly cautious in handling the money depositors put in his bank.

"Nothin' is wrong with the bank," Fry was saying. "But Colby turns down too many people who need loans. His depositors want their money. A gent named Wayne aims to open a new bank, soon as that old Dan Colby skinflint is out of the way."

"This Wayne you mention would be Ira Wayne, eh?" Long Sam asked so gruffly Fry scowled suspiciously.

"That's right." The marshal nodded. "Wayne has made a lot of friends around Comanche Ford."

"Ira Wayne is a cheap, lyin' crook of the worst kind!" Long Sam snorted. "Five years ago, he pulled a Kansas land swindle. Two years ago he left Colorado on the run, after sellin' a batch of worthless mine stocks. I'm surprised that Sheriff Jim Penn would let a crook like Ira Wayne light in Comanche Ford."

"Old Jim Penn, he's got his own hide to worry about," Fry snorted. "I went to Comanche Ford ten days ago, tryin' to cut your sign. I know that you and Jim Penn are friendly. When I asked him if you'd been around, he claimed you hadn't been in Comanche Ford in nearly two years."

"Sheriff Penn told the truth!" Long Sam retorted. "It has been at least twenty months since I was in Comanche Ford."

Joe Fry turned brick red, and there was a cold gleam in his gray eyes as he bit down on the soggy cigar butt. He jiggled the six shooter in his blocky fist, eying Long Sam coldly.

"Catchin' you has been a long, tough chore, Littlejohn!" the deputy marshal said. "I've got you at last, and I've got you good. But takin' you in dead wouldn't bother me a bit!"

"If you'd quit hollerin' my name every time a crime is committed anywhere in Texas, I wouldn't be an outlaw long," was Long Sam's answer.

"Quick!" Fry barked. "Move away from them mail sacks!"

LONG SAM stepped back. His smoky eyes were somber as he watched Joe Fry scoop up the two canvas pouches. Fry was wary, alert. He had nabbed Long Sam a time or two in the past, only to have the gaunt outlaw outwit him and escape.

"Go get on your horse, Long Boy!" Fry ordered now.

Long Sam stalked to Sleeper, swung up into the saddle, and lifted the reins. Sleeper flattened crimpy ears as he watched Joe Fry. The deputy marshal cursed, halting well away from the ugly old roan. Sleeper was a vicious tempered brute, and would paw, kick or bite any unwary human who came within reach of him.

"I'd forgot about your ornery horse!" Fry said sharply. "Pile off that blasted critter."

"Pile off?" Long Sam asked, brows lifting.

"You heard me!" Fry retorted. "I'll have to tie your feet to stirrups, and handcuff you to a saddle horn. But that roan would kick or bite me if I got close to him. So pile down, and get on one of these saddled horses, over here."

Fry jerked his derbied head towards the two horses Wilk Dawson had been leading. Long Sam shrugged, dropped split reins, glaring at Joe Fry as he lifted his right foot from the stirrup. The gaunt outlaw let the rowel of his spur rake hard against Sleeper's shoulder, and suddenly the roan's ill-shaped head went down while the rest of him slammed upward in a powerful heave.

"Whoa!" Long Sam yelled.

He flew out of the saddle, still yelling as if taken by complete surprise. He landed, face down, within a pace of Joe Fry.

"Get up from there!" Fry yelled.

Long Sam muttered groggily, and pushed at the ground with both hands. He lifted his lanky figure a foot or so, then his arms seemed to buckle. He rooted the dirt again.

"Addled, by thunder!" Fry cackled. "And what am I waiting for?"

Dropping the mail sacks, Joe Fry hauled a pair of shiny handcuffs from a coat pocket. Peering up through barely parted lids, Long Sam saw Fry's face split in a mean grin. He also noted that Fry had lowered the hammer of the pistol he held, and that he was whipping the gun up for a clubbing blow as he rushed forward.

"Just to make sure this isn't another of your tricks, I'll knock you plenty cold!" the deputy chortled.

Fry was skidding to a halt, blocky shoulders hunching down and forward now. His lifted six-shooter was already slamming towards the mop of yellow hair atop Long Sam's head when the outlaw moved.

"Hey!" Fry bawled.

Long Sam had come up as if on springs. The sinewy fingers of his right hand wrapped around Joe Fry's gun wrist. Fry slammed him savagely across the face with the shiny handcuffs. Long Sam grunted as he swung a left hook that snapped Fry's head back. Fry retaliated with a vicious kick, belting him over the head with the handcuffs at the same moment.

Long Sam took the kick on one bony hip, and saw stars when the steel handcuffs cracked against his head. Fry got his six-shooter slanted down as Long Sam staggered, and the gun roared like thunder in the gaunt outlaw's ears. The slug, he knew, could not have missed his head far. He surged against that gun hand with all his might, shoving the Colt up as it thundered again.

Fry squalled an oath and warped Long Sam savagely across the already cut and bleeding face with those handcuffs, then launched another kick at his body. Jerking sideward to avoid serious injury, Long Sam threw a blind left uppercut, hoping to land anywhere that would jolt Fry off balance for a moment.

The outlaw was surprised to feel the shock of a blow solidly planted tingle down his arm. He was even more surprised to see Joe Fry begin to fold up.

"Gimme that!" Long Sam gulped, and tore the gun from the deputy's limp fingers.

WHEN Long Sam stepped back Joe Fry buckled at the knees, pitched over on one side. The gaunt outlaw sleeved blood from his cut and bruised face, then bent forward, snatching up the heavy handcuffs that had dealt him misery. He also grabbed his own six-shooters from Fry's waistband, holstering them quickly. He stood up, hurled the

deputy's pistol far out into the thicket, and was starting to do the same with the blood-smeared handcuffs when another idea struck him.

"You'd be on my trail in nothin' flat if I didn't hobble you!" he growled at the stocky badge man.

Fry was too groggy to realize what was happening. Long Sam searched him, found the keys to the handcuffs. Then he seized Fry beneath the armpits and dragged him over beside Wilk Dawson's scrawny body. Long Sam linked the living to the dead, then snaked Dawson's gun from its holster and threw it away.

A wry grin on his bloody lips, the gaunt outlaw got to his feet. He stripped the bridle from the roan gelding that had fallen with Wilk Dawson, sending the horse tearing away with a slap of the reins. Fry groaned and began moving sluggishly. Long Sam ignored him, hurrying to the two saddled horses Wilk Dawson had been leading. A moment later those horses were racing away, stripped of gear.

Long Sam picked up the two bags of mail, hurrying to Sleeper. He took the roll from behind the roan's saddle, opened it on the ground, and tucked the mail bags in among his blankets. He refashioned the roll hastily, tying it behind the saddle again. He mounted, grinning coldly at Joe Fry, who still had not regained his senses.

"I'd like to hear you fume when you wake up and find out what's happened to you," Long Sam snorted. "But I've got other things to do."

He spun Sleeper, went down through the timbered pocket towards the stage road. He watched the roan's ears, riding along slowly. When Sleeper's crimpy ears suddenly pricked inquisitively towards a thicket, Long Sam chuckled drily, reining towards the bushes. He found a tall gray horse tied there in the brush, and knew that he was setting Joe Fry afoot when he stripped saddle and bridle from the gray. The horse plunged out to the stage road, turning north towards Division.

But Long Sam did not ride out into the road. Keeping to the timber, he turned south. He swung deeper into the hills as he approached Ned Cook's Box C ranch, holding to cover until he was past the place. He angled back towards the stage road again, however, staying on high ground and watching the road.

"If I can get through to Comanche Ford and hand these mail sacks over to Sheriff Jim Penn, this is one robbery Joe Fry can't have me accused of committin', at least," the outlaw mused gravely. "But I'd like to know if my hunch about Wilk Dawson aimin' to meet Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan down here somewhere was sound."

Long Sam fidgeted uneasily, his nerves jumpy. By cutting south and west through the hills, he could get to Comanche Ford a lot more quickly, he thought, than he could by following the stage road's meanderings. He should be heading for Comanche Ford with all haste. He must not be caught with those mail bags before he could voluntarily hand them over to Sheriff Penn or the Comanche Ford post master.

Long Sam's thinking jolted to a sudden stop. Ahead and to his right he had glimpsed two riders flashing across an open glade in the mouth of a crooked canyon. They were mounted bareback, and the bridles on the matched bay horses they rode had blinders. One rider was big and burly, and the other was short and stocky. They sped into timber, their heads twisted around as they looked up and back at Long Sam on the ridge above them.

"Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan!" the gaunt outlaw growled.

Even as he spoke, Long Sam's spurs raked, and Sleeper was thundering off the ridge. Long Sam saw the dusty Concord pulled into the mouth of the canyon from the road. The wheelers, a span of blacks, were still hooked to the coach. Long Sam's eyes turned grim as he got close enough to see the two men sprawled there beside the stalled coach.

"Shot to smithereens!" the outlaw said harshly, reining in near the two sprawled figures.

ONE of the men had been old and scrawny, while the other fellow had been bull-necked and strong looking. They had been killed back along the road wherever it was Joe Fry had found blood signs. Long Sam knew that by the way the dark smears on the shirts of the two men were starting to dry.

"Without a corpse, murder is hard to prove," Long Sam muttered. "Most likely Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan aimed to lug these bodies off in the hills and bury 'em."

Wheeling Sleeper, Long Sam went pounding up the canyon, following the sign of the two fleeing killers. The sign led up the canyon, then out to a rough, broken country that pitched southward from the main hogback. Long Sam swore grimly when sign showed that the two killers had separated. One of them had ridden off west into brushy hills, while the other had swung back east, as if heading towards the stake road again.

"For the time bein', we'll have to forget Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan, Sleeper," the gaunt outlaw said gravely. "Gettin' these mail sacks to Comanche Ford is the important thing."

Long Sam had more trouble getting down across those hills to Comanche Ford than he had counted on. The country was much rougher than he had judged it to be, and that slowed him up. On top of that he got into the wrong canyon when he did start south from the crest of the hills, and had to back-track several miles before he could correct his course. It was mid-afternoon when he finally rode down into the towering walls of tornillo, pear and mesquite that spread over the Rio Grande bottoms around Comanche Ford.

"I'd have saved a couple of hours time and a lot of bother if I'd followed the stage road!" the gaunt outlaw muttered disgustedly.

Long Sam angled along the north edge of the town, staying in the thickets. He scowled uneasily as he rode along, for there seemed to be considerable noise coming from the town. He eased out to the edge of the thickets at last, stopping directly behind Sheriff Jim Penn's barn and horse corral. He glanced at the sheriff's little house on beyond the barn and corral, then let his gaze travel on to the grim stone building that served the sheriff as combination office and county jail.

Long Sam's eyes widened in surprise. Milling around the plank walks before that building that housed the sheriff's office were a lot of people, their voices drifting out to Long Sam in shouts. He noticed, too, that riders slammed along Comanche Ford's main street, excitement in the way they rushed.

"Blazes!" Long Sam groaned. "News of that stage robbery has reached town."

Long Sam dismounted, got the two mail sacks out of his blanket roll. Sheriff Jim Penn was a bachelor, and Long Sam decided that hiding out in the sheriff's house with those mail bags until the officer came home would be safe enough.

Tucking the two mail sacks under his left arm, Long Sam walked out of the brush, keeping the sheriff's barn and corral between him and the crowd along the street. A few moments later he was striding rapidly into the dark shade of a big pecan tree at the rear of the sheriff's house. Long Sam's nerves were tight, and he went up the back steps in a single bound. He crossed the back porch and stepped into the sheriff's kitchen, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Nobody spotted me, so I'm safe!" he said with a chuckle.

Still grinning in relief over having reached the house without being seen, he crossed the combination kitchen and dining room, stepped into the sheriff's living room. The shades were drawn, and after the bright light of the outdoors, Long Sam's vision was blurred. He took two full strides into the sheriff's living room before he saw the three men standing there against the front wall, watching him over leveled six-shooters!

"Just be careful, Littlejohn, and there'll be no trouble!" a cool voice said.

LONG SAM felt as if every muscle in him had turned to stone. Slowly the three faces before him came into focus, and cold dread made the gaunt outlaw's flesh crawl. Those three men before him were big, red-headed Bob Harlan, stocky, sour-faced Dirk Morgan and handsome, black-eyed Ira Wayne.

"Boss, you better let me and Bob blast that long-shanked reptile down!" Dirk Morgan burst out.

"Yeah, look at them eyes of his begin to squinch up!" Bob Harlan rumbled.

"You two numb-skulls follow orders!" Ira Wayne retorted.

"So that's the way of it!" Long Sam droned. "Wilk Dawson, Bob Harlan and Dirk Morgan have been workin' for you, eh, Wayne?"

"That's right," Ira Wayne said calmly. "Bob and Dirk are a little jumpy because you saw them out in the hills, this morning, with a stage and a couple of dead men. They argued that you'd come straight here and report what you'd seen to Sheriff Jim Penn. They guessed right."

Long Sam's thoughts raced, and a quick excitement took hold of him. These three cutthroats evidently had no knowledge of what had happened to Wilk Dawson. The tightly rolled mail pouches under Long Sam's left arm suddenly felt as bulky as a wash tub!

"From the stir I noticed here in town, somebody must have reported the murder and stage robbery already," the gaunt outlaw snorted.

"These two fools raced on to town, after dodgin' you in the hills," Ira Wayne grunted, jerking his handsome head towards his two hirelings.

"We quit them winded broncs a mile out, and come in on foot," Dirk Morgan said gruffly.

"And the boys came right to town!" Wayne added. "Since they were promptly recognized as one of the stage teams, about every man who could find a horse went tearin' north, to see what had happened to the stage."

"But we're still safe!" Bob Harlan chuckled coldly. "This Littlejohn will either take yore deal, boss, or he'll take a few chunks of pistol lead from Dirk and me."

"So you figger on offerin' me a deal of some kind, do you, Wayne?" Long Sam drawled.

"You caught these two knuckle-heads, here, with that stage this mornin', Littlejohn!" Ira Wayne said bluntly. "Give me your word that you'll keep your mouth shut about what you saw, and I'll lay five hundred dollars, cash money, in your hand."

"You're a pretty foxy one, Wayne," Long Sam declared. "You evidently started peddlin' lies about Dan Colby's bank, here in town. Tomorrow, I hear, there'll be a run on that bank. If the money Dawson, Harlan and Morgan stole off that stage this mornin' doesn't show up, Dan Colby can't pay his depositors. Do you think I'd sell a fine man like Dan Colby down the river for five hundred dollars?"

"All right, a thousand!" Wayne shrugged "But that's the top, Littlejohn."

"No deal, Wayne!" Long Sam retorted.

"You fool, you're in no position to argue!" Ira Wayne glared.

"Me and Dirk told yuh it wouldn't work, boss!" Bob Harlan growled. "I'll get his guns, then Dirk and me will waltz the son out into the thickets."

"Move out of your tracks, and you'll get a bullet in your middle, Harlan!" Long Sam said coldly.

"You blasted fool!" Ira Wayne gritted. "You're in too tough a spot to do any bargainin', Littlejohn."

"I've got a lot more to bargain with than you think I have," Long Sam said calmly.

He took the rolled-up mail pouches from beneath his arm, let them dangle their full length before three pairs of startled eyes.

"The mail bags we taken off the stage!" Dirk Morgan howled.

"No wonder Wilk didn't show up!" Bob Harlan roared.

QUICK as a flash Long Sam Littlejohn gave the two canvas pouches a sudden flip, sending them into the faces of Dirk Morgan and Ira Wayne. The six-shooter in Bob Harlan's hand roared, but Long Sam was already plummeting to the floor, smoky eyes glinting coldly. He flipped the six-shooters from his own holsters, and the double thunder of them filled the room as he drove twin slugs through Bob Harlan's huge chest.

But Dirk Morgan and Ira Wayne had slapped the mail sacks to the floor and were shooting now. Long Sam felt a bullet leave a blister across the small of his back, and dodged when another slug slapped the hat off his head. He snapped a shot at Dirk Morgan that knocked the stocky tough down, then swung his smoking guns and let them both roar up at Ira Wayne, who was rushing in for a close-range, sure-thing shot. Wayne's handsome face contorted, and there was a blank, unbelieving look in his eyes as he toppled backwards.

"Hold it, Morgan!" Long Sam rasped.

Dirk Morgan croaked an oath, jerked his left hand away from the gun he had been reaching for. His right arm hung limply at his side, broken just below the shoulder. Morgan's blocky face was sick

and white. There was fear shining in his hard, dark eyes now as he watched Long Sam get up. Long Sam kicked the gun out of Dirk Morgan's reach, then looked down at the squat killer.

"You're not as lucky as Bob Harlan and Ira Wayne," the gaunt outlaw drawled. "You'll live to hang, Morgan. Stretch out, and I'll bandage— Thunderation!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a yelp of dismay. Booted feet were pounding up the sheriff's front walk. Long Sam jumped to a big leather chair, dodged behind it as the booted feet hit the front steps.

"Stay where you are, Morgan!" Long Sam warned. Dirk Morgan mumbled a reply, but Long Sam did not hear the exact words. The front door was slamming open, and a gaunt, white maned man stood there on the threshold, a six-shooter in one gnarled fist while he swept the room with hard gray eyes.

"What in tarnation goes on here, Morgan?" the oldster bellowed.

"Easy on that trigger, Jim!" Long Sam chuckled drily. "But come in and shut the door. I see a crowd headin' this way, and don't want 'em sightin' me."

"Sam!" Sheriff Jim Penn croaked when Long Sam stood up.

The old officer came inside, closed and bolted the door. He looked back at Long Sam then, leathery face a little pale as he pushed his gun into holster.

"Son, there's tunket to pay, I'm afraid!" the old officer groaned. "One of the stage teams come to town a while ago, and somebody had been ridin' the hosses bareback, looked like. I started out with a posse to see about that, but the hoss I was on throwed a shoe and I had to come back for another mount. What got you tangled with Bob Harlan, Dirk Morgan and Ira Wayne, Sam?"

Speaking rapidly, Long Sam gave the sheriff the high points of what had happened, pointing to the two mail bags as he talked.

"We'll go into full details later, Jim," the outlaw finished. "Right now, I wish you'd tell that mob to keep out of here. And for gosh sakes send for the post master so's I can turn these mail bags over to him. That way, Joe Fry won't be able to make the charge stick if he tries to

[*Turn Page*]

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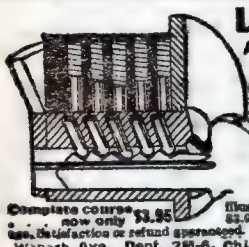

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"Son, this town and its people owe you a debt we'll never be able to pay!" the sheriff said gravely. "Yuh're derned tootin' I'll send for Gus Addison, our post master. I'll send for Dan Colby, too, because Dan will want to say his own thanks to you. And if Joe Fry comes pirootin' into town and accuses you of bein' one of the murderin' bandits who held up that stage he'll be lucky if he doesn't get ducked in the hoss trough!"

"Joe'll be here, don't worry!" Long Sam said grimly. "But get the post master up here, so's I can hand over those mail pouches. Carryin' that mail is a responsibility I'm hankerin' to be rid of, and the quicker the better!"

THE MEANEST SHERIFF

(Concluded from page 80)

here in town this afternoon," Clementine announced after the excitement was over. She looked at Foster. "And you can't stop us, Dad. After all I am over twenty-one."

Foster just looked at his daughter for a moment. "Would—would you invite me to the wedding?" he asked.

"Of course, Dad," said Clementine with a smile.

Funny thing, but Lem Crabtree resigned and left that part of the country. Guess he figured the job was too dangerous for him. I'm the sheriff of Mesquite County now, and folks say I handle the job right good for a fat man. But I'm still reducing. Why I only weigh two hundred and thirty-nine pounds now!

COMING NEXT ISSUE

LONG SAM SETS A TRAP

A Swift-Moving Outlaw Littlejohn Story

By
LEE BOND

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 9)

recognized by differences in their bark, cones and the number of needles that grow in a cluster, or follicle, ranging from one to five.

The thing that marks the lodgepole pine is that the small cones hang on for years, instead of dropping annually, as is the rule with other pinecones.

This is a very happy habit, because when a forest fire comes, the small, tight lodgepole cones pop open and scatter the seeds before the flames consume them. In this way, the lodgepole gets a jump on other trees in making a comeback on a burn.

Squirrels aren't the only critters that live on pine cones. The pinon pines of the desert mountains have a large seed that Indians harvested and stored for food. Pinon nuts, as they're called, have a sweet, pleasant taste, rich and oily, and in some Western localities are sold in stores. The flavor is something like that of a cashew.

The Dwarf Willow

Here's an oddity "Timberline," as you gals and galluses know, is an expression that defines the elevation above which no trees grow.

But it so happens that there is one kind of tree that grows above timberline and nowhere below. It's a dwarf willow. When full-grown, it stands about three inches high. It's found in the Rockies.

The mescal, a thorny desert shrub, has a heart something like an artichoke as the bloom matures into seed pods, and baked mescal heart is a favorite food of the Havasupai Indians of northern Arizona.

In southern Arizona there's a tribe called Mescalero Apaches, who put the mescal to use by making a powerful liquor of it.

The boast of the Havasupais is that they never killed a white man. But the Mescalero Apaches were about the fiercest and most warlike Indians, and engaged in many a bloody massacre in pioneer times.

Whatever lesson there is to be drawn from that, you can figure out for your ownself. Come to think about it, corn is good food according to our custom. But when it's made into a drink, then the trouble starts.

Sheep, cattle and wild game animals aren't the only ones that live on grass. Most insects

[Turn Page]

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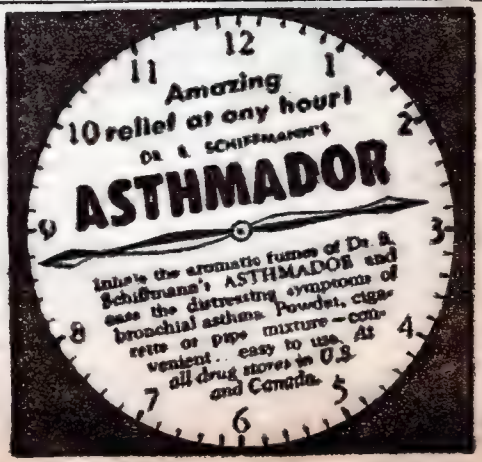
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inhabit grass and eat it—even mosquitoes. A naturalist looked into the matter one day, up in Montana, and found, before he lost count, that 120 kinds of insects attacked a single plant. Even bears eat grass, when pickings are poor otherwise.

Deep Roots

Some grasses and flowering plants root as deep or deeper than trees. Lupine reaches twenty feet down into the earth, sometimes, for moisture. Along cutbanks in many Western foothill regions you can see, in cross section, the roots of many other delicate-looking plants that exert a tremendous energy in boring far below the ground's surface. A well-digger told me that once he found alfalfa roots 60 feet down. Lots of fragile plants, whose flowers wither a few minutes after you pluck them, can split and shatter hard rock.

The world of nature about us is made up of many strange things, some sort of hard to believe. As we know, insects live on grass. But there are also several innocent-looking plants that trap and prey on insects.

I suppose it would really surprise a buffalo or a deer to know how many insects they eat in the course of an evening's grazing. It would probably surprise us, too, if we were shown, under a microscope, what a lot of crawlers, hoppers, wigglers and borers are to be found on everyday foods before they're washed and prepared. *Adios.* We'll have another chat next month.

—CAPTAIN STARR.

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

DUST clouds miles long . . . thousands of cattle moving slowly but with certainty of direction across the plains of Texas and the Indian Nations . . . cowboys by the hundreds. This was the Old Chisholm Trail, famed in Western history and lore. It is said that during its heyday, a period of nearly twenty-eight years, over 350,000 cattle a year were driven from Texas to railhead in Kansas. It's no wonder so much money was thrown into Texas during this time.

The original Chisholm Trail—not to be confused with the Chisum Trail, which was much farther west—was founded by and named for Jesse Chisholm, a settler from

Tennessee who opened a trading trail from Kansas south through the country of the Indian Nations, to end at the Red River, the present boundary of Oklahoma-Texas. The Texas trail drivers started their long drives at San Antonio and wending north, crossed the Red River to join up with the original Chisholm Trail. Thus in time the combined trails became known as the "Old Chisholm Trail," and it was along its length that so much of the history of the West was made.

Naturally, where there was big money there would also turn up badmen. Many were the ways they tried to cash in on this bonanza of horns and hoofs and millings heads —from crooked honkytonks and gambling joints, to out-and-out stealing of cattle along the Trail. But there was another way, ruthless in its manner but with some security to the crooks—security, that is, until Ranger Jim Hatfield was sent on the scene. And when Jim got through with his investigation and cleanup, one crooked angle along the famed Trail was washed out once and for all!

THE LOBO LEGION, by famed Western

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writer Jackson Cole, in next month's issue of TEXAS RANGERS, takes us along the storied Old Chisholm Trail with Ranger Jim Hatfield—takes us to the crossing of the Red River where the notorious band of cattle thieves called the "Lobo Legion" hung out. The Lobo Legion operated just a bit differently from most outlaw bands. No outright thieving for them. They depended on sheer bluff and weight of numbers, backed up with six-guns.

Spotting cattle drives coming up from Texas, the Legion would make a quick tally of cattle and men. If the odds looked right—and most times they were—they would wait until the drive had crossed the Red River and was in the Indian Nations country. Then the Legion would descend on it, hold the drive up at point of gun. The owner was given the opportunity of saving his and his men's lives by signing over his cattle to the Lobo Legion. And with no money involved! The only payment received was an escape from death. If they put up a fight it was a foregone conclusion that the entire outfit would be wiped out to a man and the cattle taken regardless.

There was no alternative except death!

It was the sheriff of the little cattle town of Wagontrack, near the cattle crossing where the Lobo Legion operated, who asked Captain Bill McDowell, in Ranger headquarters in Austin, to send him aid to cope with the stiuation. He'd expected at least a company of Rangers, but when Jim Hatfield alone showed up, the sheriff wasn't too much surprised, for he knew well the reputation of the Rangers.

It didn't take Sheriff Drago long to brief Jim Hatfield as to the situation on the Indian Nations' side of the river. The outlaws operated from there because they had no fear of reprisals; no law could touch them. Even though Wagontrack practically straddled the border between Indian Territory and the Texas Panhandle, no Texas lawman legally could cross the Red River after the Lobo Legion.

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The sheriff informed Hatfield that the head of the band called himself "Senor Wolfhead," because he wore a mask made out of a wolf's pelt. Drago didn't have much more to add, except that the Lobo Legion was probably made up of "wanted" men, and that there must be a spy hanging out in Wagontrack to check on the drives coming along the Trail.

This situation put Hatfield in a curious position, because, like the sheriff, his legal credentials would be of no worth to him once he crossed into the Lobo Legion hangout. But this didn't stop Jim. He played, and not for the first time in his law career, the role of a "wanted" outlaw, on the lam. In a frame between himself and the sheriff, Hatfield crossed the Red River with bullets

[*Turn Page*]

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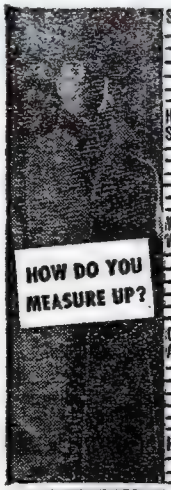

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Along with the Jim Hatfield novel, the next issue will also carry LONG SAM SETS A TRAP—a story about your old friend Long Sam Littlejohn, by Lee Bond. This time Long Sam tangles with a trio of counterfeiters, and many feathers fly before Long Sam puts the phony-money boys where they belong. And all this with Sam just a step ahead of Joe Fry. . . .

The next issue will also carry other short stories and fact articles of the old West—in fact, plenty of good reading for everyone!

OUR MAIL BAG

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correspondents. It's sure a lot of fun to peruse your letters and postcards, even though your individual opinions differ as to the stories and articles. Well, that's what makes life interesting—the fact that we're all free to think as we please. . . . Now, here are a few boosts and pans culled from the many letters and cards that have come into this office recently. Hope you enjoy reading them as much as we did:

I haven't missed an issue of *Texas Rangers* since it first appeared on the newsstands. Same being quite some time. However, I do not care for Buck Robertson and his sister Anita in the stories.—*Theodore Wycoff, Leavenworth, Kansas.*

Having read *Texas Rangers* for some time now, I have decided to write a letter giving some of my complaints. In fact, I have quite a lot of them, and most of them are about the Hatfield stories. Why can't Jackson Cole vary the formula in some of his stories? In just about every other story the villain himself kills at least one man before Jim appears on the scene. There's nothing wrong with that, but it does get monotonous. Also, these raids on ranches by the outlaws—can't they dream up some other scheme once in a while? And the last complaint—why can't Buck Robertson solve the mystery in a story now and then? I believe Buck would be pretty good on the mystery angle. But still and all, Jackson Cole is one of the best Western authors there is, in my opinion, and I'll keep on buying *Texas Rangers* whether Cole changes them to suit me or not.—*Nancy Wenger, Paradise, Pa.*

Just finished reading "Rustlers of Black Range." Think it fine. It's tops of any novel by Cole yet. I enjoyed it very much. Hope he will keep up the good work. I would not like to see Jim fall in love with Anita, as she would spoil the picture and Jim would lose all interest in his work.—*J. Mark Thomson, Hull, Quebec.*

In the July issue an old-timer wondered if the children of today have the courage and stamina of those gone by who built the West. I say yes they have plenty of spunk and could do the same job as their ancestors, and maybe a leetle mite better. Soft, lazy? No, this is not the American youth of today, or ever. When the time comes they will do their duty, even as Davy Crockett and many who have gone on

[*Turn Page*]

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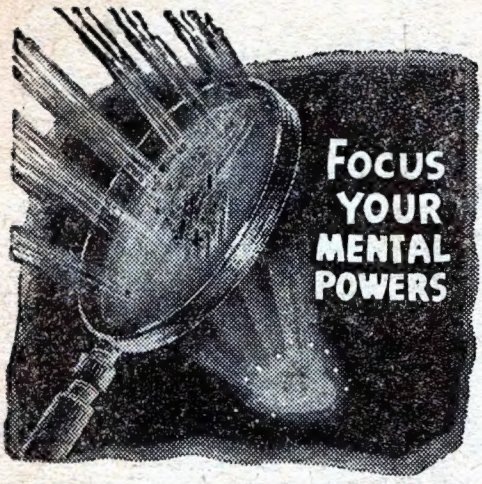

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before, and worked, fought and died for Democracy. —*Eugene Allison, Peoria, Ill.*

This is the first time I have written to you about your magazine *Texas Rangers*. I have been reading it for a couple of years and think it tops. Keep up the good work and please ask Jackson Cole to put a little more romance in his stories. The girl, Anita Robertson, is wonderful! More romance, please.—*T. Edward Power, Quebec City, Canada.*

I have read a lot of *Texas Rangers* magazines. The best story I ever read in any western was "The Ghost In Golden Armor." I didn't know what was going to happen next. I think Jim Hatfield should get married, or be in love, anyway.—*Danny Arney, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.*

When Buck and Anita Robertson are operating with Jim Hatfield, the story isn't so interesting. But when the Lone Wolf and Goldy alone operate as a team, the story is certain to be good. Let Jim and Goldy be alone. They do a good job just as they are. It would make a good story to hear how Hatfield got possession of Goldy. I think the other readers would like to know this, too.—*Harry Bowman, Jacksonville, Florida.*

So, we close the mail bag again until we meet in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. The friendly argument among readers as to whether Jim Hatfield should fall in love, and whether Buck and Anita Robertson should be in the novels, still goes on. But how about some letters telling us what type of stories and articles you like best? What's your favorite locale for a Western background? What type of Western hero do you like to read about? Just be kind enough to drop us a line! Please address The Editor, TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York.

That's all for now, folks. Thanks for being with us—and we'll see you again in the next issue.

—THE EDITOR

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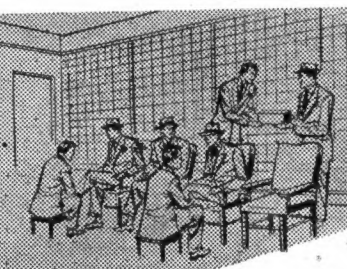

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